

じん(自然の敵)
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イラストしづ

カザロウ ~~デイズ~~ -in adaze-

KCG
文庫

Kagerou Daze -in a daze-

Kagerou Days I

—My eyes are disoriented. The world changes to monochrome in an instant. In the middle of all of that, the blue of the clear cloudless sky and the red..... red, sign, and.....! The intense contrast emitting from just those two colors burn the back of my retina.

Just what is this spreading out in front of my eyes right now, I wonder.

The sound of the cicada's foolish crying voice pierces my ears.

The smell of iron mixes with your scent.

Without realizing it, all of my feelings directly stimulate the inside of my brain like a punch.

In the pedestrian crossing were tire marks that seemed burnt and your small body that was about the same size as that red line drawn to it. It wasn't as if I was going to try and do something at this point but once I ran over to your side, I could feel the heat enveloping in my throat, eyes, nose, head, and reality slamming into me hard.

The person in front of me isn't you.

It wasn't you who I was just talking to moments earlier.

It's just a red lump of something.

No matter what anyone says, this thing isn't you.

.....I began to feel nauseated and my head ached horribly. My vision was blurred as if I were trying to open my eyes underwater, water dripping, leaving marks behind on the asphalt. It appears that the water seemed to be trickling down from both of my eyes.

I move my mouth to try to talk to you but, I'm not sure whether it was drowned out by the sounds of the cicada's voices or if my voice didn't come out right from the beginning but I couldn't hear anything at all.

I have to tell you.

I just decided recently to try and tell you.

I have to hurry and tell you.

The swaying heat haze (kagerou) was standing awfully close.

He just stood there, as if he were ridiculing us or trying to get in the way between you and me.

Please don't get in the way. I can finally convey this to her right now.

You can laugh at me as much as you want later. That's why, please, just leave us alone for now.

This is really late, and you might feel disgusted but.....

The way that you're just a little bit selfish,
And your bad habit of hitting me whenever you get embarrassed,
And the scent of your fluttering hair, all of it,
—I really loved you.

Jinzou Enemy

After well over a year of putting it off on both our ends, mudskipperkip and I have joined forces to finally finish the first full chapter of the first Kagedaze novel! “Artifical Enemy” focuses on our hikineet protagonist, Shintaro, and the super pretty cyber girl, Ene! (Well, technically the very very first chapter is Kagerou Days/Daze I with Hibiya, and can be found here, translated by tattahitor.)

It's a fairly long one, so read it however suits you best—in one, long sitting or taking breaks at intervals.

Novel Masterpost

Also, if you can, please consider purchasing the novel from Cdjapan to support the series and its creators!

I woke up to the sound of a piercing siren. All at once, my heart began to throb violently. I looked up to see a white ceiling projected above me. Still unable to completely understand the situation, I fell from my bed, knocking over a small side table.

“.....Ah!”

I hit my right shin hard, the burning pain registering in my brain moments later.

As my eyes filled with tears of pain and fear of the explosive sound, I gathered up the futon which had fallen in the avalanche, and as I wrapped it around my body, the sound of the siren stopped.

“Good morning, Master!”

The moment I heard that voice, I fully grasped the situation I was in.

There was me—the teary-eyed Kisaragi Shintaro—in an unnatural position, wearing only underwear, with a futon wrapped around me, and a girl—Ene—looking on from inside the monitor, teary-eyed from trying to hold back her laughter.

A hot, summer day. Not long ago, society had made a huge deal about the end of the world and the like. Meteorite impacts, the downfall of the Mayan civilization, etc. Now, the top news consisted of peaceful topics like, “It’s been decided that the ultra-popular idol will star in her first TV drama!”

For someone like me, whose job was to be extraordinarily well-informed about top news stories, and had fought in the front lines of heated discussions about the apocalypse controversy on the internet, I have to say that the current topics lacked punch. Well, that said, my job was primarily one

of an ordinary 18-year-old, high school boy. But at the time, I conducted voluntary home confinement while exchanging comments with the inhabitants of the internet. In my spare time, I protected my home, diligently serving as a guardsman.

As for the basics of my work, I'd started producing amateur music from scratch and, on the side, would always leave comments of love, and comments of criticism, on new videos of a certain video website. I'd had this job for more than two years already.

Incidentally... I had yet to make anything.

But today, I was unusually full of motivation!

Plopped down in front of my computer, I stuffed myself with the sandwich my mom had given me that morning while glaring at the step recording software on the screen. My goal was to get a first place ranking on a certain video site, then a ringtone and karaoke delivery, and finally, a major album.....!

After all is said and done, I wanted to be made into a big deal.

Normally, that high ambition was in vain, and in a matter of ten minutes, it would fall to ruins, comments of criticism from artisans becoming the default. With the exception of my mother's love in this sandwich, I wondered what special ingredient it contained. As if a god had descended, the phrases kept on pouring out.

"This.....This'll sell!"

I said this aloud, and steadily continued to work the software. Even though I was doing unbelievably well composing something, I was filled with fear. Since earlier, something that I would call a "virus" was darting about inside the monitor, as if it intended to interfere with my work.

"It seems like today is going to be a considerably hot day. Wow! The expected high is 35°C in central Tokyo!

"What. It seems that, already, in central Tokyo, around ten people have been transported for heat stroke. Master, when you go out, you must not forget to take steady measures!"

I'm unable to understand why someone would go out on a day like this.

Or perhaps I should say, I'm unable to understand why someone would go out in the first place.

"Oh, right. About today's siren, it's an alert used in a certain country for danger levels four or higher. I increased the frequency to the level Master would hate the most—"

"What do you mean by 'today's siren'? You're planning one for tomorrow too?!Ah."

I'd just dug myself even deeper. This was bad.

Moving from right to left in the monitor, she suddenly came to a standstill after bringing up that random topic. She drew up close to the screen with a smile, almost as if to say, "Bingo!" and continued cheerfully,

"Oh, it's completely spoiled now, isn't it~? In that case, I'll have to prepare something even more exciting for tomorrow! Oh no, you needn't pay me, since you're my guest."

"What are you, some kind of salesman!? Didn't I get this bruise because of you!? Isn't this an accident resulting in injury!?"

As she let out an ominous laugh while rubbing her hands together, I pointed out my pitiful bruise marks, frantically referring to them.

But such resistance was also in vain, as a question mark appeared above her, and she only tilted her head with a completely innocent face.

3 AM on August 14th. The sound of the siren that suddenly echoed throughout the house had even woken up my mother.

As my mother came running into my room, the thing that met her eyes was the “pretty girl” on the display, but the one her angry shouts were directed at was her son.

The angry shouts that rang out seemed like they’d disturb the neighbors much more than the siren would, and just as I thought I saw a clenched fist appear before my eyes, it became morning.

And that is how I had arrived to the present moment. I hadn’t looked in a mirror, but I was sure that I now had bruises on my face, too.

“Give me a break already, seriously..... What am I gonna do if my PC breaks.....? I really would die.”

“Awww, Master, how kind of you to worry about me before yourself! You came up to me straight away when you woke up this morning, too, didn’t you!?”

While her eyes glittered gaudily, like in an old-fashioned shoujo manga, and she zoomed in to fill the whole screen, I yelled furiously at her again.

“That was so I could delete you!! Also, if I lose my PC, I really mean that I would die!!”

“Oh, you’re just being modest again..... Master is such a virtuous gentleman..... So dreamy!”
She wasn’t listening.

She really wasn’t listening at all. I’d had enough already.

How did things even become like this.....

About a year ago, a mysterious e-mail had arrived from an anonymous sender. I had no way of knowing any better at the time, but after I’d opened it, my life became so stressful it was almost laughable.

As soon as “she”, who had been lurking in the e-mail’s attached data, infiltrated my computer, everything in the terminal had become occupied in an instant.

At that time, I didn’t know what the heck had happened. I ignored the overlapping application windows, and just when I thought I saw a geometrical effect spread across the whole desktop, a beautiful girl, with blue hair in pigtails, materialized there, her entire body shining with a faint glow.

At first sight, I thought she looked kind of “cute”.

There was once such a time. Yes, certainly, there was.

She, who had so suddenly appeared, gave off an atmosphere you’d often find with the main heroine of a story. Something like, “You’re the one that helped me, right.....? Please, let us fight together.....”

At that time, as an inhabitant of a cluttered room at the very bottom of society, I was pleased with thinking, “I’ve pulled the hero card!” and that starting from now, I would fight a mysterious organization, everywhere paranormal events would unfold, mysterious monsters would appear and comrades would join forces.....! Such a thrilling story for the first episode; it was too perfect of a chance meeting to just be a misunderstanding.

Or so it had seemed.

Well... not one supernatural power was awakened, no demon eye opened up; nothing, much less the comrades I requested, arrived. The closest thing to a monster’s appearance was a cockroach. To begin with, our very first conversation when we met had gone something like,

“Ah, from today forward, please treat me well~”

“Oh, okay.....”

I've never heard lines like that in any action/adventure movie.

We started out with that personal narrative.... Although it actually wasn't even that deep, we'd still managed to have a decent conversation.

"What in the world are you? I've never even seen or heard of software like this...."

At that time, I'd asked that in strangely polite tones, and the reply I got was,

"I'm not too sure myself~"

That's basically how it went.

Still, it was a good start. Since she at least answered my question.

Maybe it was because she'd warmed up to me after a week passed, but her eccentric behavior gradually became more noticeable as she began interfering with my work and blatantly pestering me. The folder in which I'd accumulated embarrassing, sentimental lyrics was renamed to "PIG FEET," and the folder with my collection of carefully-selected treasured images was changed to "Graveyard of Sexual Desire".....

It took about a month for that renaming festival to make its way throughout my PC, and even the demo of the song I made was changed to a title so sentimental, it made it seem like I thought something like, "If I can make an album with this, then I can pioneer a new genre of music....."

Naturally, I held back angry shouts each time, so much that my throat burned, but since it didn't seem like it would have much effect, I refrained from vocalizing them.

"Hey..... You changed my password, didn't you?"

Since that morning, I hadn't been able to log into the video site at all. But I didn't recall changing my password. When it comes to this, she's usually the one to blame.

"Ohh! As I would expect from you, Master! I'm so glad you've noticed!"

"Change it back.....Now....."

"Come on, what's the rush? With that said, I've prepared something special!"

A box asking "Do you want to save?" appeared, the "NO" option below it was selected, and in an instant all the windows displayed on the screen were, not minimized, but closed.

"Gyaaaaah!!!"

After that, a four-choice quiz reminiscent of Golden Thursday was displayed on the monitor.

"Alright, first question! If you answer this correctly, I'll tell you the first pass—"

"Are you stupid!? I'll die, you know!? Oi!! The song!! Oi!!"

I rose from my chair and shouted at the monitor. I wonder how ridiculous I looked while doing so. The person in front of me had an expression that seemed to say, "Wow... What a dangerous person..."

It's your fault I'm acting like this in the first place.

"Haa....aah~....."

Suddenly losing my strength, I held my head and laid it down on the desk. In that instant, there was an unpleasant sensation of my elbow hitting something.

"Ah!! Master, Master!! Your drink!!"

"Eh?"

—My partially-consumed soda had spilled onto my keyboard and mouse.

Twice now, a shriek echoed throughout the room. I dabbed the keyboard with tissues in a panic. The sugary liquid had soaked into it, causing the worst case scenario to go through my mind.

It was no use thinking about it. Right now, I had to concentrate on saving this life with my body and soul!

I finished wiping up, then frantically pressed each input key. Only the “o,r,t” keys worked.

It seemed that I was too late. Tears of regret rolled down my cheeks.

“Master! The mouse, the mouse!”

That voice brought me back. That’s right, there might still be a life I could save!

Holding back tears, I picked up the mouse.

“I beg of you.....! Come back.....!”

While my voice leaked out, I continued to dab it with tissues with utter devotion. A questionable amount of time passed, and once again, I checked to see if there was a response. Only the right click worked. The menu appeared almost mockingly.

How much more unreasonable could this world be?

What had they ever done to deserve this? It was just too cruel.

“Oh! Master, you can type tororo! Ah, wait, totor—”

“Just...stop talking.....already.....”

I wanted to give into my urge to just dispose of my computer, and her with it, but I would die doing that. My hand covered my face as I wallowed in this hopeless feeling, letting myself be engulfed by the anger that had no outlet to release.

——A moment of silence. The sound of the air conditioner filled the room, carrying in fresh cold air from underneath that gradually cooled off my entire body, all the way up to my head. Right. And here was the most annoying thing about her. In the past, each time I was driven mad by her odd behavior, I would delete her. However, there must have been backups on the internet, so as long as my computer was connected to it, she would always be revived right after being deleted, as if nothing had happened. Then, in that case, maybe the solution was to go offline? Of course, it was obvious that I wouldn’t be able to endure a few hours of that kind of hell. And thus, this vicious cycle was born.

I was sure that she was a threat created by somebody’s hand. An enemy, hence the name “Ene”. I didn’t know who it could have been... but to give such a ridiculous personality to a hyper AI like this, they definitely had to be someone unpleasant.

“Phew.....” I breathed out. I had already experienced this series of arguments many times before. But today, there were just too many different things that had piled up. Anyone else would probably go crazy if they were subjected to her excessive level of harassment. If I did say so myself, I thought it was pretty impressive that I’d come this far.

I wanted someone to praise me, but regrettably, I was alone. As a hikineet, it was hopeless.

I wonder how much time passed as those unproductive thoughts circled around in my mind. Suddenly, I noticed that there was a strange silence. Although I had told her to stop talking, it was rare that she ever actually listened to what I said. Slowly, I moved my eyes to the display, and was met with a completely unexpected scene.

In the middle of the screen was information for possible delivery dates of numerous consumer electronics mail order sites. However, that wasn’t what surprised me. What surprised me was that she was glancing over at me with her head bowed apologetically.

The moment our eyes met, she averted her gaze, mumbling, “Ah, well, um....” and pointed at the already-dead keyboard and mouse.

"Well, um.... I-I didn't think things would get this bad..... I just wanted to play a little prank, so...."

What was she talking about.....? I tilted my head in confusion, but then when I saw that she seemed to be waiting for some kind of response, I finally understood.

"Eh.....? Could it be that you feel guilty about it.....?"

".....Ah!"

Taken aback, she immediately looked down.

Her legs were fidgeting, and for some reason, they made me remember the feeling of our first meeting, and I averted my gaze, as well. A mysterious tension formed between us. In any case, I had to say something.....!

"Well, since it's already happened, there's nothing we can do about it.....And they were getting old, so I'd been thinking about changing them out soon anyways....."

As I finished speaking and looked back at the display, she already had her back to me and was in the middle of looking through each of the mail order sites.

"Riiiight~?! I was just thinking about how you'd be better off buying new ones! Actually, it was a miracle they lasted as long as they did~ I'd say it was a peaceful death, don't you think so!?"

I was speechless.

Have I ever experienced a feeling this ambiguous?

It was neither extreme anger nor sorrow, but only the feeling of nothingness that passed through my heart.

"Huh? Oh, well this isn't good~....."

As I started to surrender to that sensation, her sudden comment pulled me back.

"What's the matter? I'm fine with anything as long as it works, so hurry up and find me a site that does same day deliveries."

"Well, about that.... I guess I'm a bit to blame for this."

"Way more than just a bit."

"Master, since I think you'll die within a day or two without either of those....."

"Pretty much."

"I figured. So, I tried looking around, but..... Master, what's today's date?"

"Hm? It's the 14th.... right? I think so..... ah!"

Startled, I looked at all the search results pulled up on the display.

All of them said "no same day delivery."

"It's the Obon Festival, so none of them will do deliveries until the day after tomorrow."

I could feel dizziness coming on.

"The day after tomorrow.....? Two days.....?"

Unable to help it, I leaned back into my chair.

Two days. For a normal person, that probably wouldn't seem like very long at all.

However, to me, there could be a matter of life or death no greater than this.

It was like going two days without food.

Or two days straight without sleep.

—However, this was something on an entirely different level.

It was almost as if I'd been told to stop breathing.

Can you hold your breath for two days? No, it shouldn't be possible.

Since I'd started living this way two years ago, my body was practically useless unless I had access to the internet. While I did have a cell phone, for some reason, the reception in our house was really bad. Or perhaps I should say, I hadn't used it for so long, I wasn't sure if it even still worked properly.

It was good that the PC itself wasn't broken, but with the operation terminal completely dead, it was practically a useless box. If the one sitting inside of the display were even the least bit sympathetic, this situation might not be so serious. If only I could give her instructions and have her carry out the operations for me.

However, having to spend two days with her would probably result in death via a hole opening in my stomach due to stress or something.

Up until now, I'd been able to prevent any holes from opening up by basically ignoring her whenever she talked to me, but would I have to ask her for every little thing from now on? If I really proposed that idea, she would probably agree in a heartbeat, with her eyes shining like she'd just acquired a brand new toy.

In fact, she'd already been staring closely at me since earlier, as if to say, "Come on..... You don't have a choice anymore, right.....? Just give in already.....!"

———I already had two paths laid out in front of me.

Would I give up my PC and die, or die once I'd become her plaything?

"My options suck....."

A feeling of hopelessness escaped my mouth together with a sigh.

To be honest, even I found it ridiculous, but I'm positive that I would die if I really did go offline. I'm not even joking. Tears started to form in my eyes when I saw that death was my only option in this extremely idiotic situation.

".....Well~"

"What is it.....?"

"Well, um..... I'm sure you're also thinking the same thing, but... since I'm the one that overdid it a little this time....."

As she said this, she bowed her head again, like how she'd tricked me earlier, combined with more fidgeting motions.

"What's with your lack of variation in apologies! You won't fool me anymore!"

"N-no, really!! Wait just a minute, I'm telling the truth! I really do regret it! I'll make it up to you by doing anything you ask for three, or even four, days!"

She started making mysterious claims, and had the screen zoom in towards her face dramatically.

"Huh?"

"I mean, until the order arrives, I don't mind acting as a replacement keyboard, or anything else you need! I won't mess around, either! I'll do everything just as you tell me to.....! Really, I will....."

With slightly teary eyes, the screen zoomed into her face even more.

She.....! She had this kind of variation.....?





For an 18-year-old male's virgin heart to beat so rapidly over something so simple. How pitiful.

However, while I did think that I couldn't simply just give in here, she had been seriously looking at mail order sites since a while ago, so maybe she truly did feel guilty.....?

Just as I started to think this, I noticed that there were some words displayed behind her.

What was it.....?

When I looked at the window behind her, in the bottom left, the question for the four-choice quiz app was in the process of being rewritten.

"Question #1:

If you answer this question correctly, I will input a single letter of the word that Master wishes to search! However, if you answer incorrectly, I'll post Master's prized image collection, one image at a time, onto the internet for everyone to see. Therefore, please answer with care——"

".....Oi."

Her eyes continued to water with tears, and she tilted her head cutely in confusion.

However, I no longer felt anything anymore.

"That thing behind you."

".....?.....Ah!"

Flustered, she turned around and closed the app, and as if nothing had happened, she went back to staring at me with teary eyes. Her expression had clearly become more awkward than before, and as if to reflect this, the tears in her eyes increased.

"....."

"U-umm~.....?"

".....I've had enough."

"Eh?"

—Two years. I became immersed in sentimentality as I started recalling various memories, but I didn't have a choice anymore; I had to do this in order to survive.

I rose from my chair and opened my closet. Given that I didn't even go out into the neighbourhood, I only had to rotate between a couple sets of clothes. For that reason, my dresser was basically unused.

But today... just for today, I would open it.

"M....Master!?"

I heard a surprised voice from behind me, in tone that'd be used if saying something like, "It can't be!"

Taking the first step, I looked at my hooded parkas and jerseys which were neatly displayed. The memories of isolation from back when I used to wear these came flooding back all at once. “Ugh.....”

As I remembered this and that of the past, I was struck by a feeling similar to that of an old, throbbing wound. I violently shook my head, picked up the folded jersey that was at the very top of the far right side, and then closed the drawer.

Moving onto the second step, I took out the cargo pants and shorts that were also neatly folded. From there, I selected a pair of khaki cargo pants, and again, promptly closed the drawer.

“Master! What’s wrong!?”

I took off the sweats that I had been wearing up until then, and as I put on the clothes which I had selected, she panicked as if I’d done something very serious.

“You’ve never been dressed like that before! What’s the meaning of this.....?”

“.....Shopping.”

“Eh.....?”

“I’m going shopping! Is there anything wrong with that?!”

“Shop....ping.....?”

It seemed like she hadn’t expected that reply.

What else did she think I would be doing after this?

“That’s right..... I’ll just go buy it myself. Since you haven’t been of any help.”

“Shopping.....!? You sure surprised me! I thought you were going off to die or something of the sort!”

“Of course not! What kind of guy would die just from soda being spilled on the keyboard?!”

“Well... Master, for one...”

“.....Fair enough.....”

It didn’t seem like something I wouldn’t not do. While unfortunate, it was fact that I had considered that very thing not too long ago.

We continued to banter back and forth while I proceeded to get dressed.

“.....Well, I guess this’ll do.”

I pulled the zipper up until it reached the top of the jersey, and with that, I had finished changing.

The slightly-stiff clothes that I hadn’t worn in a while made me feel nervous for some reason, as if I was wearing them for the first time.

“Wow~! You actually look pretty cool! Although, I think this puts an end to your old look.”

“Oh..... really? Is that alright.....?”

“It’s completely fine! You look handsome!”

“Really? I feel kind of embarrassed now....”

While embarrassed, but with feelings that weren’t altogether bad, I turned to face the screen to see images lined up of first-class, good-looking fashion models. And from the other side of the images, I could only hear a voice saying, “You really do look so cool! It’s just the fashion sense I would expect!”

“You’re bringing me down, so just.... quit it already.....”

“Eh? How come?”

“Forget it. I get it already.....”

In an instant, all of my enthusiasm for the outing was stripped away. However, I didn't intend to back out of it at this point.

I removed the bag hanging in my closet, and hung it around my neck.

I'd finished preparations for the most part. I just had my small belongings left to tackle.

"Let me see, wallet, and..... Guess I don't really need anything else."

I picked up my wallet, which I usually only used when paying for mail orders, from beside my bed.

"I guess that's everything. Phew..... Well, time to get going, then."

I took a deep breath, and approached the door to my room.

"W-wait just a minute, Master!"

The moment I put my hand on the door, I heard a voice calling for me to stop, and I looked back towards my computer.

"What.....? I'm already leaving, so don't do any more weird things."

"Well.... Um, hasn't it been a while since you've last last gone out? So that's why I was thinking, um..... Wouldn't two people be better than one~?"

"Two? It's not like I have anyone I can invite."

After living two years like this, I didn't have a single friend who I could still contact now. Well, even if I did, it wasn't like I'd invite them, anyway.

"No, that's not really what I meant..... Umm..... I mean, if it were me, I could serve as a navigator or something, so....."

The way she was acting seemed to heavily imply something. Of course, it was obvious that she was trying to tell me to take her along, but what was I supposed to do? Carry my computer with me?

"How are you even supposed to come? Fine, I'll bring you along, so come on out, if you can."

"Eh? Really!? Okay, I'll come out right now, so.....!"

She smiled, pointing at the small dresser beside my bed.

—On top of it was a dust-covered, touch screen cell phone.

*

A hot, summer day. Truly, a hot, summer day. Had summer always been this hot?

Having been blessed by the air-conditioned indoors up until a while ago, I was now gushing so much sweat I thought I could hear it sizzle.

It'd only been twenty seconds. Although I'd managed to walk outside, my life points were diminishing before my eyes.

"Ah~ testing, testing. Master, can you hear me? Ah~ ah~"

".....Should I go back now.....?"

"Eh? Did you say something? Please speak a little closer~"

"No..... it's nothing....."

The owner of this uninterested voice probably couldn't even feel the heat. It was something to be envious about.

Wearing in-ear-canal earphones, as well as having my phone set up almost like a transceiver, I wondered if I looked something like a strategist carrying out an operation.

Playing the siren that was used that morning, I was threatened to recruit friends on the bulletin board of my high school's homepage using my real name, and, in the end, was pressured into giving into bringing her along.

On the display screen, Ene was grinning from ear to ear as if she were the phone's wallpaper. However, she didn't seem to have any intention of calmly playing that role, and was instead moving around rapidly.

To think that the day would come where I'd be forced into an operation by a program.....

Though the operator was more like some kind of terrible, modern plague.

Arriving at the public roads, I was finally reminded of the summer's attack power.

Further down the road, the heat-haze swayed.

I felt like how a creature from the North Pole or the Antarctic would feel if they were suddenly thrown out into the savanna.

"Hot." The exact humidity or temperature didn't matter.... It was just "hot."

"Are you serious.....? Was summer always like this.....?"

"Didn't I say so a while ago? Today, it seems there's quite a number of people being transported to the hospital for heatstroke. Ah, Master, did you bring your insurance card?"

"I did... so it'll be okay if I'm transported anytime, geez...."

When I left the house, I brought various things so I'd be prepared if anything happened.

Even in the worst case scenario that I collapsed somewhere, I would have my identification on me.

"Ohh! Then there's nothing to worry about! Now then, let's walk briskly!"

"Alright.... —wait, why are you saying that?! It's your fault in the first place that this—"

"Ah! Master, you should have turned right on the intersection just now! Right!"

"Eh? That road just now? Oh, my bad... Somehow, I don't remember the route at all. Honestly, I don't know which way is which anymore."

"Master really doesn't go out, does he? The last time you went outside was two years ago, wasn't it? The map has completely changed since then, you know?"

Being too focused on the heat, I wasn't really aware, but it did seem to have changed considerably.

There was a ridiculously huge building of some kind, and several newly-constructed apartment buildings; the slight bit of information that I remembered was now entirely useless. Was this what they called urban development? I'd lived in this city for a long time, but it shouldn't have been possible for things to be altered so drastically in just two years. Or could it be because I had been confined in my room, that it was just the difference I felt from going out for the first time in so long?

Almost as if my own city was being redone by someone, little by little. I was hit by that kind of sensation.

The residents of this city, me included, probably go through their daily lives without even noticing the changes.

While thinking about this, I went back to the intersection, turned right as I was told, and saw the main street. Surprisingly, my house was situated in a fairly good location compared to here. The amount of traffic was reasonably high here, and a lot of people went by. On the street that came between the buildings on either side, the way people appeared and disappeared from left to right, and from right to left, didn't look much different from the display screen I stared at every day.

"Umm, from the next street, go to the left and keep following the road aaaall the way down. And then, to the right—..... Master?"

"Eh? Oh, y-yeah. I see. So, which way do I go now?"

“Like I said, the next street is to the left! And after that, right! What’s wrong, Master? You’ve been spacing out a lot... Could it be that you have a heatstroke already?!”

“No, it’s not that. I guess I just have a strange feeling.... Is there really a department store over there?”

There hadn’t been a department store located there at least two years ago. When I thought of buying electronics, I remembered always having to make quite a long trip to do so.

“I have no doubts. Umm... on the homepage, ‘The department store in your city! From furniture to home appliances to kitchenware, we stock everything’ is what’s written.Oh! But it only just opened last spring.”

“Oh..... No wonder I didn’t know. But why is it in a place like that.....”

“Hm~ But the areas surrounding here seem to be actively developed. If you go a little right from here, there’s a large hospital, and before that is a new school... and across from the school is a large library. It seems that all of these buildings were started last year, and finished up this year at about the same time.”

“Something like that is possible!? Somehow, it really seems to have changed...Oh, are we almost at the main street...?”

After exiting the one-way street, the panorama of the city spread out before me.

Billboards, roadside trees, office buildings and restaurants.

A student in uniform, an office worker apologizing profusely through a cell phone in one hand. All of it emitting noise, noise, noise.

From this variety of unnecessary information, I felt something like dizziness.

“Ohh.... this feels impossible already. Should we go back? Okay, let’s go back.”

“There sure are a lot of people. So this is the power of the Obon holiday. Let’s do our best!”

“You really don’t listen to what I say, do you? Ahh~ There really are a lot of people...”

While there was maintenance going on, compared to the trail from earlier, it was much easier walking on the sidewalk, under the shade of the roadside trees.

However, the people and cars passing by on the streets made my body temperature rise considerably.

While muttering and grumbling, I went down the street and approached a massive intersection.

“In the end, won’t you be going, ‘I’m dyingg~ I’m dyingg~,’ if you’re at home? Have a little more patience!”

“You—..... ah, it’s no use. I don’t want to waste my strength trying to talk to you anymore. Oh, it’s green now. Should we cross.....?”

When I crossed the intersection once the signal turned green, I saw a park a little ways ahead. Swings, a jungle gym, water fountain, etcetera; there was a bunch of nice playground equipment lined up that kids probably wouldn’t be able to help but to rush up to play on. As I kept going, I saw a glimpse of a large, distinctive billboard above the right-hand side of the huge, department building that had been previously covered by the roadside trees.

“I-it looks a lot bigger than I thought....! They really built something like this....?”

“That’s because it seems to be the region’s largest department store! How about looking for clothes, too?”

“Idiot! Didn’t I say I was only going out for today? I’m sick of this hot world.”

“That’s true~! I thought you’d say that! Really, if Master said that he’d go to buy clothes, I’d have to dial 119*!”

“Am I a caveman!? I buy clothes, at least! Idiot!”

“Ohh, then will we be going to look at them?”

“N-no... it’s fine for today...”

As soon as I said that, I heard a chuckle that sounded like, “Pukkuku.....”

Feeling my face turn red, I stuffed my cell phone into my pocket.

“Uwaa! Master, it was a joke! Let’s come back another time, okay?”

Because the cell phone was in my pocket, she probably couldn’t hear my voice.

“Another time..... yeah,” I managed to mutter.

Using the billboard as a landmark, I saw another huge two-lane intersection. Separated by the row of buildings on the right-hand side, the department building appeared on the other side of the intersection.

——The full picture could only be described by one word: “gigantic.”

The big parking lot was filled with cars to the point that I didn’t know how much ground it would cover if it were a tennis court, and from the road, there was a constant flow of cars coming in and out.

Beyond the rows of colorful cars, there was the department store that probably had more than ten floors, consisting of two buildings. On every floor, there was an arch-shaped pathway connecting them.

“.....This is amazing. They were able to complete something like this in two years.....?”

“Ah! We’re already here? Hey, Master~!?”

“I just crossed the intersection. We’re not there yet.”

“I want to see, too! Come on, Master~!”

“Geez, you’re so annoying! I get it! I get it, okay!”

If I ignored her too much, I’d be yelled at. I couldn’t stand that, so I took out my cell phone and faced the back of it, where there was a camera, in the direction of the department store. From an outsider’s point of view, I probably looked like I was taking a commemorative photo.

“Uwaa.....! This is truly amazing! It’s like a castle!”

“Well, coming this far, it does feel more like a castle than it does a department store.”

“Wow..... Ah! There seems to be an amusement park above the shops!! Let’s go!!”

Was she making full use of the vibration feature to express her joy? Her excitement was higher than it had ever been.

“No, we’re not going! Pretty much wherever we go, it’s not like you can do anything”

“Hmph....”

The vibration stopped, and as soon as it did, only the sound of a text message being received could be heard.

Of course, there was no way anyone would be sending a text to this phone, so it could only be her doing.

“.....? What is it?”

When I looked at the cell phone, she was glaring at me, agitated in a way that looked unusually aggressive.

“Master is really so tactless! Even I have places that I want to go see, you know!”

“Huh? Like I said, even if we go, you can’t ride the rides, so what’s so fun about that?! It’d be boring.”

“...tch! I don’t care anymore! Why don’t you just go shopping and ride the merry-go-round by yourself!”

“Like I said, I’m not riding it....”

The moment I thought I saw her scowl, the power turned off. But the time display hadn’t disappeared, so was it energy-saving mode? Anyway, the screen was pitch-black, and even the sound had turned off.

“Oi! What’s with you, o~i.....”

Even shaking the cell phone and pressing the buttons didn’t bring any change. The time display continued to read the elapsed time.

Currently, it was just after 12:30 PM.

“What’s with her.... I really don’t get her at all....—ow!”

Not long after crossing the intersection, I crashed into someone near the entrance to the department store lot—possibly because they were just standing there.

“Ah, I, sorr—“

Raising my face, when I saw those “eyes” that suddenly met with mine.... Time froze for a moment.

Despite it being this hot, summer day, they were wearing a long-sleeved, lavender parka., Their gaze was just barely visible from deep underneath the hood, but it seemed exceptionally cold and lifeless.

I was struck with a jolting sensation, as if I’d just seen something I shouldn’t have, and then felt the sweat pour from my body.

“Um.... I.... Uh.... Er.... I-I’m sorr—“

I was embarrassed by how immediately obvious it was that I was socially incompetent. I cut my apology short, and lowered my face. It’s over. I was going to be killed. Mom, thank you for everything up until now. At the very least, I wanted a girlfriend.

“.... It’s fine, really. It was my bad.”

“Eh....?”

When I raised my face, that person was gone without a trace.

There were a lot of people around, but it wasn’t so crowded that a person could disappear instantly, or even if they moved right away, it wasn’t as if they could have been blocked from sight even from a distance.

Feeling that I would collapse on the spot, I couldn’t help but bend over with my hands on my knees. My heart started its delayed pounding, and as if in sync, sweat started dripping. It wasn’t because it was my first time making contact with someone in a while, but because, without a doubt, those eyes were the coldest I’d ever felt in my life up until that moment. Surely, it wasn’t because I’d bumped into them. But more than that... I felt the tranquility of not being able to imagine anything more complex.

“....—kay....?”

“.... Eh?”

“I asked if you were okay.”

Taking my cell phone out of my pocket and looking at the screen, I wonder when it had turned back on. She was sitting in the center, but just like before, she had her cheeks puffed out.

“Oh... you’re still there? I thought you disappeared not too long ago..... ah”

Before I could finish my sentence, her face was already turning red right before my eyes. Was this bad? No, this was definitely bad. I’d never seen her become infuriated at something before, but it was obvious that it couldn’t be good.

“No, my bad! It was a joke! Really, my bad! Look, that amusement park-place on the roof! Let’s go there later! Okay?”

Just as soon as the red color was starting to cover her face, it went away, and her eyes shone to the point that I thought I could literally hear them sparkle.

Although it’d only been for an instant, this was definitely the wrong button. I’d been had.

“The amusement park!? Really? Master, just now, you said you’d go, right?!”

The phone was vibrating so much my hand felt like it would go numb, and her eyes were shining to the point of it being annoying.

“Eh....? Ah.... yeah! Well, it’s fine once in a while!”

“It’s a promise, right!? Umm....! Ah! I like the one that goes up and down! Also, um, um!”

It was a more positive response than I thought, but even though I regretted it slightly in my mind, well, I didn’t feel bad about it.

What happened earlier with that guy didn’t even matter anymore.

I see. So even she is amazed by the outside world.

Things like smells and temperatures, because she can’t feel them, she might have always seen the outside world as a more attractive place than I did.

Passing through the gate, and while answering vaguely, “yeah, yeah” to every little request that came one after the other, I continued down the road on the lot.

The design of the cobblestone path that led to the entrance of the department store must have cost an unbelievable amount of money. With thorough decoration, color-coded rectangular stones in every color were arranged together.

No doubt, it was based on some psychological image that an ordinary person like me wouldn’t be able to understand.

Without comprehending even a bit of the creator’s intention, I continued walking at a brisk pace, and arrived at the two towering buildings to the left.

Looking up at them from below, they were tall enough that they had the illusion of being able to reach the sky.

In front of the huge glass doors, there was an information board. This too, was elaborately decorated.

As if it were a luxurious painting, it was placed in a frame.

“Let’s see, home appliances, home appliances..... Oh, seventh floor?”

“Anyway, after the ride that goes up and down, then it’s the jet coaster. And after that, the ferris wheel too....”

“Aah, I get it already! I’ll go!”

Because it was being repeated like a spell, even in my head, I was already imagining something like, “after the ride that goes up and down, then it’s the jet coaster.”

“Then let’s get right down to shopping! Mouse! Keyboard!”

“First, drinks.....”

When I stood in front of the automatic doors, they opened, and in that moment, I was greeted by a rush of cool air.

“Ahhh.....”

It felt so good that my voice leaked out.

“Uwaa, Master, that’s just gross, isn’t it!?”

“Those are your first words to your Master that was dying up until now!?”

.....Crap.

I’d unintentionally yelled. All at once, I’d attracted the attention from families of customers enjoying their shopping in the special summer goods corner on the ground floor. A young boy was pointing at me and laughing innocently.

“Ah.... Ah, er.... Haha.....”

They probably thought I was some weird guy for sure. While putting on a subtle fake smile, I hurriedly went to disappear into the elevator hall, putting on this show for the boy.

Don’t you ever turn into someone like me, boy.

In the elevator hall that had its own independent area a short distance away from the shopping space, there were benches and vending machines lined up. Elderly people, and people comforting babies in strollers were seated there and taking a break.

“Vending machines.... Uooo.....!”

Somehow, after being patient while thinking, “Until I can make it here....” the time that I would acquire drinks had finally come.

I was so thirsty that every breath I took stuck in my throat.

Reaching into my wallet and taking out a thousand yen bill, I inserted it into the vending machine.

The target was the exquisite carbonated drink.

My chest was pounding with excitement thinking about the black sugar solution that would soon permeate this body.

I hastily pressed the button at the exact time it lighted up. Only 0.3 seconds. It was a fairly godly speed.

The clang sound was a pleasure to my ears. This was just one of the charms of vending machines. It was a sound I hadn’t heard in so long that I was starting to get teary-eyed.

The can that I grasped in my hand was so chilled that you wouldn’t think it was something from this world.

Feeling the can with only the palm of my hand was a wasteful bliss. I was tempted to roll the can all over my body, but that would be just perverse.

At last, I put my finger on the pull tab and opened it. The hissing sound stimulated my ears once more, and the scent from the opened soda stroked my nasal passage.

I couldn’t resist pouring it into my mouth. From the expression called permeating, it brought such a satisfaction that I could no longer speak—

“....Master, you panting is really gross.”

“Pwaaa.... Aaah....”

“This grossness isn’t normal.”

“Shut up! If you drank this, it’d end up up the same way! Totally.”

“It would not. Anyway, the elevator’s here!”

Of the four operating elevators that lined up, the door of the one on the far left opened, and people flooded out quickly. After it'd emptied, the guests that had been waiting on it filed in.

"Eh? Ah, it's fine, I'll get on the next one. Let me finish my drink first."

Answering with that, with gulping noises, I enjoyed the rich scent of the soda, and into my body the sugar solution—

"Ahhh! It left! Please drink faster!!"

"I just said I'd go on the next one! I'm drinking right now!!"

"No way.... If you don't hurry up, it's going to close!!"

"There's no amusement park that closes this early in the afternoon! Besides, there's a lot of elevators, either way."

The area in front of the elevators had become tightly packed, with people even lining up for them.

"I'll get on the next one for sure, so just relax and wait."

Ignoring the fact that she was making the phone buzz and ring with a rotating vibration, my eyes wandered towards the elevators.

Even the up-down panel button could be pressed with the lightest touch. The design ensured ease of use, and it suggested the thoroughness of the management. Something like this department store's testimonials adorned the wall next to the elevator on the left.

"Huh, it says, 'With computer-managed, state-of-the-art disaster prevention technology, we guarantee your highest safety in any situation in this building.'"

"Is it state-of-the-art? Then, when it becomes next year, the 'state-of-the-art' part will be erased, right?"

"You're pointing out something really harsh.... Next year they'll put in next year's newest technology. Anyway, with all this décor, isn't the interior really impressive, too?""

"Ohh... somehow it seems like a lot of work."

"Doesn't it? Ah, it's here."

Above the elevator that was the closest to me, the number "1" flashed, and just like before, people suddenly flooded out. And just like before, once it had emptied, the guests that had been waiting crowded inside.

With where I was standing, it seemed I would be able to ride without a problem this time. Throwing away the empty can into a nearby garbage can, I just went along with the crowds to get into the elevator.

The people that had gotten in before seemed to have pressed the "7" button for the home appliances department, as the number on the panel was lit up in orange. It saved me a lot of trouble of trying to reach the button in the midst of the shoving, tightly-packed crowd. Reaching the limits of capacity, the doors of the elevator quickly closed and began to ascend. I could hear the air conditioning, but as expected with this many people in a cramped space, it was hot. I wanted to get off as soon as possible, but until reaching the seventh floor, the elevator practically stopped at every other floor; I was jostled by the constant exiting and entering of people, until it finally reached my destination.

The doors opened, and with a few other customers, I filed out.

There were summer clothes, swimming suits, and even food sales spread out on one floor. It was almost like entering a different world.

One side of the wall was entirely covered with a glass window, allowing sunlight to shine brightly into the store.

The unbelievable openness of the home appliances department gave off a magnificence like that of an office in a luxury building.

The first thing that caught my eye was the kitchen appliances corner. Products that didn't seem as if they could possibly fit in our small home were lined up, like a huge refrigerator that seemed big enough to store the whole head of pig, and a weapon-like rice cooker that you wouldn't think was only used to cook rice. There were multi-colored promotional signs with sales pitches like, "New product!" and "Very popular!" written in bold lettering. People with no interest, like me, however, wouldn't understand what it was trying to convey.

The extended pathway that served to divide the floor was probably forty meters long. In the back, there were upscale audio systems, and numerous state-of-the-art LCD televisions displayed on the wall.

"Woah, this place is huge! Isn't just this floor alone bigger than that one electronics store?"

Since it'd be a bother if she started making a fuss again, I continued towards the middle of the sales floor with the camera of my cell phone faced casually forward. Although they were simply large home appliances, seen from a wide distance, I wondered if most of the ones here were even affordable. At a glance, the salespeople that were cheerfully making announcements, too, were as many as a dozen.

"Master! What's that thing that looks like a bomb?!"

"That....? What? Isn't that a pot? It sure has a big, grenade-like design."

Being aware that it clearly resembled a weapon, it was colored a solid viridian, with a lumpy design. If not for the meter on the side to tell the amount of remaining water, it completely looked like a dangerous object.

"It's so cool.....! Ah, Master, you said you wanted hot water, right?!"

"That was when I was eating cup noodles, and it was too much of a pain to go downstairs, wasn't it? I don't need something this rugged..... Anyway, if I have to go downstairs just to get water, it's the same thing."

"Eh~ why not? When you have guests over, it'll surely become a topi— I'm sorry, I said too much...."

She made a meek face like she'd accidentally mentioned the death of my parents, and suddenly quieted down.

"Eh, what, can you stop?"

"Sorry, that was a really insensitive remark... I'll be more careful."

"Stop! Stop it! Anyway, what is this! This is an amazing design!"

While I meant to quickly change the topic to a stove that was displayed further down the aisle, to no surprise, it was from a maker I hadn't heard of. Furthermore, there was a paper pasted there, with "Sale on Stock!" written boldly, with the price being marked down as much as third of the original price.

"No, seriously! It's simple, but this is amazing. Should I buy this and go back home?!"

"No matter how you think about it, isn't this one unnecessary?! That bomb from earlier is way better!Anyway, Master, what did you come here to buy?!"

"Ohh, right, a mouse. Let's hurry up and buy it so we can go home."

“....Master?”

Sending buzzing vibrations through my hand, I felt the atmosphere thicken.

“Yeah, I know! The amusement park! I didn’t forget about it! Um, PC electronics are....”

Glancing around, I looked at the signs hanging from the ceiling that pointed to different sections of home appliances. However, perhaps because it was so carefully divided into subsections, I couldn’t find it very well.

“PC electronics, PC elect-.....!”

Probably because I’d gotten dizzy from turning around while looking upwards, I ended up bumping straight into a salesperson. I was bumping into people way too often today; this was really not good.

“Excuse me....! Ah, uh, um.... Could you please tell me which way to the PC electronics department?”

Removing the earphones from one ear, I tried talking. With reason being that she was a salesperson, I ended up talking in an apologetic manner. When I properly looked at her face, I saw that she was quite the beautiful person. She definitely had a boyfriend. Her scent drifted in my direction.

For a brief moment, the sales lady hesitated with an, “Umm...” before politely answering, “Ah, ah! PC electronics? If that’s what you’re looking for, just go straight down from this aisle, it’ll be on your right once you reach the far end.”

“Um.... Th-thank you very much....”

Although I had been nervous about trying to hold a decent conversation with another person for the first time in a while, I felt a sense of relief knowing it had gone well, and my chest overflowed with the satisfaction of talking with a pretty girl. Yes, this was a good store. With both my mood and walking pace lightened, I triumphantly continued down the aisle that the sales lady had told me about.

“Ah~ Master?”

“Hm? What’s up?”

I replied in a way so cheerful that even I found it strange. Could a person change this much just by speaking to a girl? Life was a wondrous thing.

“Well... this.....”

As soon as she said so, something like the bustling noise of environmental sounds abruptly came in through my earphones.

“Hm? What is th-....”

Just as I was about to ask what it was, I suddenly heard an eerie male voice mumbling, “Aah.... Excuse mee.... Uhm.... Could you please, uh... t-tell me which way to thePC electronics d-department...?”

The next moment, I heard a clear female voice start speaking, “Umm...” in a very-obviously embarrassed manner.

And with that, the sound cut off.

“That’s how you sounded, Master. Would you like to listen to it again?”

It was apparent that this was the result of continuing to only converse with mysterious software for the past two years.

Along with the sensation of something like cold stones sitting in my stomach, I felt the urge to scream at the top of my lungs.

“Well, I’m already used to how you talk, but for ordinary people, I think it might be more of a challenge.”

“Let’s... just go home already....”

“We can’t!! We haven’t even gone to the amusement part yet!!”

“It’s enough already... I already feel like I’ve ridden a thrill ride...”

It felt like tears would start falling if I had my head down, so I walked with my head held up. I would never come back to this store again.

“Isn’t it fine~? If you want to talk to someone, I’ll be glad to listen anytime!”

“Then when we get back, I’ll consult you about my life.... I want to die....”

“Hehehe~ Please leave it to me! So rest assured, Master! Ah, look look! We’re almost at the PC electronics corner!!”

By the time I’d noticed, on the right side of the aisle, there were headsets meant for chatting online, and web cameras being displayed. It was probably a corner made to promote video streaming that was popular lately. How idiotic. If only humanity would no longer have a need for even a voice...

From there, I turned right into the next aisle, to see the latest ultra-thin laptop, and high-spec PC made for online games—all of this brilliantly shining machinery that I would usually be delighted over.

However, right now, I only wanted to get the mouse and keyboard as soon as possible, ride that thing that went up and down, ride the roller coaster, too, and go home as quickly as I could.

“Let’s hurry up and buy them and go home....”

“Master!?”

“I know, I know.... Ughh....”

As I tottered along to the space where the mice and keyboards were displayed, there were promotional signs adorned everywhere with things like, “With a simple method, you can use the internet!” “Connect your PC with your mobile phone and chat via a webcam!” However, to be honest, my eyes were already tired.

Escaping from that glamorous aisle, I arrived at the section that had the mice and keyboards that I sought.

With both wireless and trackball types, here as well, there were a wide variety of the latest models.

“There seems to be a lot of different kinds, huh. Honestly, any is fine with me, but I’d prefer one that doesn’t break easily....”

—It was sudden.

It was really sudden. Even though I was wearing earphones, the explosive sound that rang out throughout the floor was loud enough to hear.

It was dry and unrealistic, but I recognized what it was.

At the same time, I could hear the sound of people yelling.

In a moment, my heart was throbbing violently.

As soon as I removed one side of my earphones, the reality dramatically increased; screams and sounds of people chattering dominated the floor.

“Just what——?!”

With little communication, I didn't understand the situation. The moment I warily exited into the large walkway, the sound of something made of iron collapsing resounded on the floor.

I looked towards the elevator hall, and the passage I'd just come through was blocked by a white, iron wall.

It was a shutter that had appeared to cut off access to the elevators. It wasn't like display shelves, but a completely solid wall with no gaps.

When I looked at the very back of the divided pathway, right in front of the shutters, I came to understand to the origin of the explosion. At first I didn't think it to be possible, but as soon as I realized it to be the truth, the color drained from my face at an impossible speed.

The first explosion and the cause of the scream had probably been "that".

The saleslady who had helped me earlier was lying there.

From those healthy-looking thighs to the white floors, red pools of blood gradually spread. On a face distorted in pain, not even a fragment of that dazzling smile from before remained.

There, stood a heavily-built man. He had an unshaven beard, and wore a sneaking suit like someone from a movie about the special military force.

In his hand was a gun, and dangling at his waist was a real hand grenade, that released an entirely differently sense of presence than the pot from earlier. However, he paid it absolutely no attention, and stood with an unruffled stance. Surrounding him were several men dressed in a similar manner. The man with the unshaven beard gave off the sense of being in the center, and all of them pointed guns in the direction of the shoppers in each aisle. Screams of shoppers echoed from the smaller aisles that I wasn't able to see, along with the overbearingly authoritative instructions to subdue them. The salespeople seemed to have just as little means of resisting as the shoppers did. Most likely, the men that were present here had more accomplices elsewhere.

The first person to hear the sound of the explosion and gun.

Or perhaps, they were the person that saw it directly.

At any rate, including all those that tried to escape, everyone was gathered into one place at an alarming speed.

This floor had been completely taken over by this group of people at an astonishing rate.

"...Well, is this everyone?"

"Yeah. Including all the shoppers, this is all the people on this side of the floor."

"Good. Ah~.... Even though you were all in the middle of enjoying shopping on a holiday, it really is a shame. How unfortunate for all of you."

The bearded man said this with imprudent wording, spitting at us who were underfoot.

Several dozens of people were gathered in the space designated for the television corner, at the very back of the home appliances department on the seventh floor. Everyone had their hands restrained behind their backs with something like strong duct tape, and were all seated on the floor.

The glass window that had previously let in sunlight, was now covered by a white shutter that would normally only be put in place after business hours. The faint sound of sirens from the patrol cars could just barely be heard from outside, and on the other side of the shutters that divided the floor, there were the voices of what seemed to be negotiations from the police.

In front of us stood nine men that looked like the very embodiment of the term "terrorists". Three of them were pointing guns at us, three were by the shutters, and two, that seemed to be leaders, were huddled together with the bearded man from earlier and engaged in conversation.

“13:00 hours. It’s time.”

“Gotcha.”

With the cue from his comrade, who had been glancing at his watch while speaking to him, the bearded man pulled out a cell phone. He began talking into it casually, almost as if he were simply ordering a pizza delivery.

At that moment, the voice did not come from the mouth of the man standing before us, but at a high volume from the speakers that were meant for broadcasting announcements throughout the building.

“Ah~ testing, testing. Oh, can you hear me? To all you police, it’s been hard on you. I’m only gonna say this once, so listen carefully.”

As soon as his voice sounded, the voices shouting negotiations from the other side of the shutter stopped.

When the man paused to take a breath, only the faint sounds of the sirens were audible.

“As you can already see, we have taken over this floor. The several dozens of hostages are, well, safe. For now. Frankly, we have only one demand. Within thirty minutes, I want you to prepare one billion yen.”

Without caring about the reaction of those around him, and almost as if saying something extremely obvious, the man continued in an indifferent tone,

“In half an hours’ time, bring the money to the top floor of this building. We have someone on standby to receive the money, which you will toss down from a helicopter. Things like counterfeit money or transmitters are useless, so you’re better off not trying. Also, well, although I’m sure it’s already clear, in the case that you are unable to prepare the money or you prioritize rescuing the hostages first, I will kill every single person here.”

The people being held hostage began to react with increasing volume, but were quickly silenced once held at gunpoint again by three of the men. The sobbing voices were reduced to a quiet whimpering.

“.....And well, that’s about it. You’d better act accordingly. If you break even one of the conditions I’ve said here..... Ah~ well, I’m certain you understand. Well then, take care.”

From an outsider’s point of view, the man sounded as if he were merely talking to a friend. Sighing as he’s just dealt with a troublesome triviality, he sat down on a nearby bench.

Honestly, what were the chances that I’d become a terrorist’s hostage?

I had to be the only one to suddenly experience something like this after going out for the first time in two years.

I was thoroughly shocked at my misfortune. Would you just call this my unlucky day?

“Ah~ It’s so boring just waiting around. Should I have made it fifteen minutes instead?”

The man had his legs crossed and was messing with his cell phone in such a relaxed, careless manner, you wouldn’t think that he was a criminal culprit that had just committed a serious crime.

The man standing beside him, that seemed to be something like a close associate, was calming him in an inoffensive manner, saying “Just be a little more patient....”

These men that were behaving as if they’ve already completed a perfect crime.... What did they plan to do after this? Have a getaway helicopter pick them up? But even if they did so, it was obvious that they would be tracked and caught in one fell swoop. They had another accomplice to receive the money, and there had to at least be one more to control the shutters and operate the broadcasting system. What kind of “safety guaranteed” state-of-art technology was this? It’d failed completely!

Quite the opposite of the purpose it'd been made for, this kind of system had been to their advantage. Having all the security systems managed completely by computer meant that if you could take control of the computers, you could manipulate this entire building in the palm of your hand.

Although I wasn't sure of the means, if they seemed this calm, they probably had a certain way of escape. Because they'd been able to carry out this incomplete, yet strangely complete, situation in such a short period of time, it wasn't likely that they'd left out an escape route in their plans.

—However, it didn't seem like they had any intention to wait in silence.

Rescuing of the hostages? These people in front of me didn't seem like they gave even a hair's width of care for innocent lives.

Our lives were being held at stake here.

Something this insecure, it wouldn't be a surprise if it fell apart at any time.

If only.

If only there was some opening, I could turn this situation around.

“—Tch!”

All of a sudden, the bearded man held the back of his head, and stood up while screwing up his face in anger.

“.....Oi.....!”

“Huh.....? Guh!”

The man that had stood up drew close to his accomplice and punched him in the stomach with all his strength.

“What do you mean, ‘huh?’ Bastard, whose head are you hitting, oi! Well!? Say something!”

He started to kick his comrade who was collapsed onto the floor in agony.

In this incomprehensible situation, the place quickly became an uproar.

Even the men that were pointing guns in our direction, as expected, were in a state of being unable to hide their agitation.

“Why, all of a sudden....?”

“Kukuku....”

In the midst of the mens' angry voices resounding on the floor, I heard the sudden, quiet snickering of the boy sitting behind and to the left of me.

“Eh....?”

Shocked by hearing this sudden and out-of-place laughter, I looked towards the boy.

“.....? Ah, no, sorry sorry, it was just too funny, heh.”

Age-wise, he appeared to be a bit younger than I was. A youth with large, cat-like eyes, short, wispy brown hair, and wearing a thin, grey parka.

“Funny? What is.....?”

“Eh? Well, a lot of things. Anyway, you—You've been making rather interesting ‘eyes’ since earlier. Kind of like.... ‘I have to do something~ But there’s no chance for me to~’”

Even now, the shouting continued. Including the terrorists and the hostages, the tensions of everyone in this place were at its peak, and yet only this boy carried a loose atmosphere around him, almost as if he were a bystander.

“How do you....?”

Speaking in small voices, it probably couldn't be heard over the din of the shouting. The cat-eyed boy continued.

“Well, just somehow or other. But what is it, in reality?Do you have some kind of plan?”

“.....If my hands can be freed for just thirty seconds, I can render these guys speechless.”

“Ohh, that’s amazing. Well, you don’t seem like you’re lying. What’s the probability of success?”

“.....Sorry to say, but..... 100 percent.”

Hearing that, he began snickering again.

“It’s fine if you don’t believe me. Well, it’s not like I’ll be able to free my hands.”

“No, sorry, sorry! It’s not that I don’t believe you, it’s just that you really seem sure of yourself. I see, I see.”

Even after saying this, his expression still appeared as if he found the whole thing unbearably amusing rather than truly trusting me. Ignoring the fact that he had to be out of his mind to be laughing in this kind of situation, I felt a strange sense of relief from his words.

“Umm, I’m just guessing, but I think these guys will make another announcement again in a little while. When that time comes, an opportunity will surely be made, and then it’ll be up to you. Do your best.”

“What? And what’s that supposed to mean? I already said that I can’t break free of these, first of all.....”

“Ahh~ This pisses me off. Oi, I’m going to announce it one more time. Connect me to the broadcast.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Ignoring the fact that he’d beat his comrade (who continued to sporadically deny, “I didn’t do it!”) black and blue, the bearded man, evidently still angry, judging from the vein popped on his forehead, shouted the order to another one of his accomplices.

Even though ten minutes hadn’t yet passed since the last broadcast, it seemed the second broadcast would begin soon.

Whether it was a coincidence or not, beside me, the boy that had predicted this situation seemed to be having fun watching this scene unfold before us.

Certainly, everything had happened just as he’d said. However, would an opportunity really open up in a situation like this? But, even if one did, it’d be useless if I couldn’t free my hands.

Hearing something from his accomplice, the man took out his phone again and began the broadcast for the second time.

“Ah~.... Can you hear me? I’ve decided to decrease the time to prepare the money by ten minutes. That means there’s only ten minutes left. If you wanna complain about not having enough time, I’ll kill half the people here right now. Understand?”

Once again, the hostages started murmuring again, and small screams rose up. Even the terrorists that had immediately silenced the commotion earlier showed confusion, as this change of events seemed to be different than what they had planned.

“And I’ll say this now... We’re leaving by helicopter after we get the money. You’d better not follow us. The helicopter’s filled with explosives. If we release them, they’ll probably eradicate the streets. If I sense any trace of someone following us, I’ll immediately release those bombs.”

We could hear the police stirring from the other side of the shutters. Of course they would; after all, all the people on the streets had just been taken as hostages, as well.

Their plan was meticulous, not to mention the size of their organization played a large part in it. They were willing to take the residents of this city as their hostages just so they could ensure their

own escape. With how completely restrained they were by the force of the threats, not to mention the short amount of time they had left, it didn't seem likely that the police would be able to handle this situation.

"What the hell are they thinking.....?"

If the bombs were released from here, then my house would be within their range. If, by any chance, my mom and younger sister were at home right now, there was no mistake that they would get caught up in the explosion.

"Damn it.... That's going too far....."

I was starting to lose control over my rising anger.

However, as if he had anticipated this, the cat-eyed boy spoke to me,

"It's alright. There's still time, so it'll be fine."

I could no longer stand his carefree attitude.

"....This isn't the time to be fooling around! My family could die here!!"

Before I could stop myself, I ended up yelling. My voice caused the whole floor to become deadly silent, and of course, even the men with the guns looked shocked.

The cat-eyed made a face that seemed to say, "Oh my.....", but didn't seem terribly surprised.

Looking at me with a piercing look, the bearded man walked over.

He stopped right in front of me, crouched down, and brought his face close to mine.

"Hey, what's wrong with you, boy? So noisy...."

The moment I heard his voice up-close, the realizations of his acts of violence hit me one after another.

My body was hit with a feeling of fear all at once, and began trembling.

"Oi, oi, you're trembling. What happened to that show of confidence just now!?"

Grinning, he held me up by the hair.

"What a weakling... You don't get out much, do you!? I'm sure no one would care if trash like you died, right? Isn't that right? Oi!"

Cackling, he directed his comment to his other companions.

Their loud voice really hurt my ears.

—That's why I was glad I only had to listen to them directly through "one ear".

"....ife...."

"Ah? What'd you say? It was so quiet I couldn't even hear you!"

I looked him in the eye and said it clearly.

"Bastards like you should just rot in jail for the rest of your life!"

"Just as I thought... you really are interesting! Excellent."

The moment after I heard this, the huge TV that was leaning against the wall behind the man came crashing to the floor. Because it was so sudden, everyone turned their attention in that direction.

Immediately after, the huge speakers that were lined up below the TV began to fall, one by one, despite not being touched at all.

"Hey! What's going on!?"

The bearded man dropped me onto the floor, and walked over there while pointing his gun.

"Who's there——!?"

This time, before he could finish speaking, the display shelf close to him fell over, sending several of the products tumbling down on him.

“Uoooo!?”

Right behind where the shelf had fallen, as if to trap the bearded man, I saw the PC electronics aisle that I had been in earlier.

Although I didn't understand what was going right now, this had to be that “opportunity.”
The next moment, the binds on my hands came off.

“There you go. I'm looking forward to your performance~”

When I looked beside me, the cat-eyed boy was grinning while shaking his hands, which should have been tied up.

My heart was pounding loudly.

Much louder, and stronger than even when the siren had played this morning.

I pushed myself off the floor in one swift movement.

The gun-wielding men were still panicking, unable to fully understand the situation.

Even I didn't fully know what I was doing.

—But I knew that it was something that I had to do.

I jumped off of the display shelf that was trapping the bearded man, trapping him even further, and ran towards the PC electronics aisle.

Naturally, the other men reacted to this, and pointed their guns in my direction.

I heard the hostages scream, and shout, “Watch out!”

However, it was already too late; the mission was about to succeed.

Before jumping forward, I pulled my phone out of my pocket, and called “her” for the first time in a while.

“I'm counting on you.... Ene!”

“You'd better take me to the amusement park after this!”





I heard the familiar, cheerful voice of a girl through my right earphone.

Taking the cable used for connecting phones to the PC for the camera function, I unplugged it and connected it to my own phone. When I did, I saw a familiar figure run across all of the display

screens.

And at the same time, an impact I had never felt before, hit me in the ribs.

It felt like my body had been struck by a hammer.

After that, I was completely blinded.

Unable to regain composure, I collapsed, and crumpled onto the white floor.

I felt all of my strength rapidly drain from my whole body.

As I was quickly losing consciousness, I could hear the sound of the shutters opening.

The warmth of the sunlight enveloped my body.

It felt like when I used to take a nap in the classroom, in my seat by the window, and “that voice” would speak to me.

*

.....How long had I been sleeping? When I opened my eyes, I was lying in a bed in a room full of books. I looked beside the bed and saw a water basin and a towel. Has someone been taking care of me?

Still in a daze, I felt my breast pocket, but I couldn’t find my phone.

Even when I fumbled around the bedside, it wasn’t there either.

—That time, when I’d become a hostage....

Through the right earphone that I’d still had on, Ene had been speaking to me insistently.

Truthfully, she’d been much more annoying than that bearded man.

When we had first been captured, she kept giving me strange encouragements like, “Uwawa.... Rest assured, Master! I’m sure help is on the way!” And then when I’d been threatened by the bearded man, I’d seen her personality take a complete 180 degrees turn as she snapped, “Can I kill this guy!? Can I!? Master!!”

In the first place, since the building itself was run by computers, even if the control room had been taken over by some high-level hacker, it was obvious that they stood no chance as long as I sent Ene in.

Even so, in that situation where the phone’s camera was unusable and communication between us was impossible, I was pretty surprised that she’d been able to figure out what was going on her own, and resolve everything in that small window of opportunity we had. I’d been convinced that she was completely insane, but she could be surprisingly level-headed.

Well, in any case, I felt like it was also thanks to Ene that I was alive right now....

I didn’t really want to, but I’d have to thank her properly..... I hadn’t been able to take her to the amusement park in the end either, after all....

But since I couldn’t find my phone right now, did that mean it’d been left there in the department store....? Well, if it was her, she’d probably be able to come back somehow anyway....

More importantly, since I had all this time to myself now, I should be making the most of it.

Today, I’d sleep to my heart’s content—

“.....Actually, where is this, anyway!?”

I bolted up from my bed and looked around at my surroundings.

“Eeek!”

Hearing a thud, I looked over and saw a girl, with long, fluffy, white hair. Had she been the one looking after me this whole time? My sudden loud voice had scared her into falling out of her chair.

“U-uh... umm....”

“Ah, wahh! I’m sorry!”

For some reason, she apologized, and then hid behind the chair.

Once I’d calmed down and grasped the situation, I realized that I barely felt any pain in my body.

If I remembered right, I was sure I’d had been hit by a bullet....

“Umm... You’re—”

“Master~! Are you awake yet!?”

The moment I started to speak to the girl, I heard a familiar voice. However, when the door to the room opened, the ones that came in were people I never would have expected.

The cat-eyed boy, and the one I bumped into near the entrance at the department store—I’d thought it was a guy at the time, but after looking properly, it seemed she was actually a girl. And.... And my sister, Momo, was also standing there, holding my phone out in front of her.

“Ohh! Master, it’s great that you have so much energy! Now then, let’s all go to the amusement park together~!”

Ene said to me in a cheerful voice from the phone’s speakers.

“Eh? Momo? Wait, huh? That time..... huh?”

“Stupid big brother! Why’d you have to take it that far?! And Ene, about going to the amusement park today to make up for yesterday, as expected, it probably wouldn’t be such a good idea right now....”

When had they gotten so close? My sister, Momo, was talking casually to Ene.

“Ah, eh...? No, I’m fine with going to the amusement park, but more importantly, I—”

“R-i-g-h-t?! As expected of Master Tough Guy! A man should never go back on his word! Let’s go! As soon as possible!”

“Eh? What’s that? Are we talking about going to the amusement park now? Let’s go, let’s go!”

“D-do we have to go out again?”

The cat-eyed boy leaned over, and the white-haired girl’s shoulders shivered as she remained sitting on the floor.

“Ah.... Sorry it got so noisy all of a sudden. Luckily, it seemed the bullet only grazed you, so we brought you back here for the time-being. It would have been troublesome if too much of a commotion stirred up.”

“Eh? Uhh....”

The hooded girl’s “eyes” looked different from the time I’d bumped into her.

“Master! Since you’re awake now, let’s hurry! If we don’t, it’s going to close!”

I was too confused to try and make sense of the multiple conversations going on around me, and soon gave up on it altogether. I stopped trying to think.

“....Oh, whatever.”

So I wasn’t going to get any rest, after all, then. It wasn’t fair.

At the very least, I wanted to sleep for just a while longer, but with how noisy Ene had gotten, it didn’t seem likely that she’d even allow me that much.

But for some strange reason, I wound up smiling a little.

—As usual, I could hear the terribly noisy cries of the cicadas from outside of the window. And from here on, our long, long August 15th.... began.

Kagerou Days II

I saw a horrible, unpleasant dream. A dream where you disappeared right in front of my eyes.
I've seen this dream again and again.
This was all a dream I saw yesterday.

I wonder how many times it was today.
I wonder how many times it was yesterday.

I wonder how many times it's been that we've talked in this park as well.
This may be the first time for you but I don't know how many times it's been for me.
I've talked about this with you before too.
I've talked to you about it many times.
And every single time, you believed me.
You seriously worried about it.

But every time, you would always die in the end.
Every time I told you about it, you would worry and make a sad face.
That's why I've decided, I won't tell you anymore.

You don't need to worry. I'm fine already.
And I've come to sort of like these moments where we would talk in the park.

It's alright as long as I can hear you talk.
Though, because you would talk about the same thing each time, I've already remembered every character and every phrase word for word.
Even so, it's fine.
It's fine so all I wanted is for you to talk.

During the moments where I'm listening to your voice, I feel at ease without hearing those noisy cicadas.
Because I get to hear only your voice.

When we look at the clock, it's around 12:30PM.
"Should we start heading home, soon?"

When I hold out my hand, you blush terribly while grabbing onto it.
You really are disgusting all the way to end, huh.....
This is why you're not popular.

Well, it's about time so I'll leave it at this.
Thank you for everything, Hibiya.

As I thought, the noisy cicadas,
the standing, swaying heat haze included
.....and summer, I really hate them.

—As I look up, an iron pole comes down before my eyes at just the right time.

Kisaragi Attention

“My, good morning, Momo-chan! You’re looking cute today as well!”

“Thanks..... Ahaha.....”

Bowing slightly, I hurriedly passed by. That was the thirty-seventh time today.

Instead of saving time by taking the straight route that most students use to go to school, I walked through the mostly deserted shopping center where there weren’t that many people in the morning. At this time, all of the shops were still closed and there were no shoppers to be seen—or so it should’ve been, but the shopping district was slowly began to become more lively.

From the stores in the direction I was going, people suddenly appeared one after the other, as though timing it perfectly, starting various conversations with me all at once.

“Oh, Momo-chan! Are you headed to school? It must be difficult, having to go even though it’s summer vacation!”

“U-Umm..... Yeah, I guess..... Haha.....”

Thirty-eight times.

After awkwardly greeting the grocer who had suddenly popped out of nowhere, I faced forward to see that the streets were finally beginning to overflow with people.

“.....Ah!”

I faltered for a moment, but this was no time to be lost. Ducking below the shutter beside the grocer, and turning right at the drugstore, I fled to a smaller lane.

Half running, I checked my watch.

Even though things were like this, I was rather lucky today.

If today had been a bad day, I’d be running back to my house by now.

I might even be able to pass through the school gates well before they close today.

I immediately increased my pace, made a right turn, and reached the end of the three-way intersection. At that moment——, I realized the naivety of my thoughts.

At the bus stop right in front of me were so many people lined up that not even two buses would be able to accommodate them, probably because of a delay. A man standing near the back noticed me, and once he raised his voice, every single person’s “eyes” simultaneously looked toward me.

—This is bad. This is really bad.

Wincing at the chorus of cheers, I happened to look up at the clock that was above the bus stop and grew pale.

My wristwatch's batteries might have ran out, but it had truly felt as though absolutely no time as passed.

An "uweeeh..." escaped from my mouth, but it was drowned out by the loud humming of cicadas.

*

"Gaaah.....! I knew it....."

The school gates had already been shut so tightly that not a soul could possibly squeeze through. Well, if there was enough space for a person to squeeze through, there would be no point to having the gate in the first place, so I guess you could say that it was doing its job pretty well.

9:10 A.M., August 14.

I tried to be on time, but ended up already much too late for even the first period of supplementary classes.

Even though I somehow managed to avoid the people at the bus stop who wanted my autograph, at that moment I was already late. I took a risk by taking the shortest route, the main street, and my luck had run out.

Even though people would inevitably overrated, one of my songs that overly encouraged romance played throughout the streets. There was a poster hung up for my new single where the music came from.

On top of that, playing on a giant monitor was a music video of me dancing in a dress that just screamed "death by frills." Right below that was a record shop that was selling my new CD, and a large line of people who wanted the limited edition product (the poster) just outside of it.

"If I hadn't passed by at that moment, who knows what would've happened to you by now..."

Parked outside the school, my manager's car felt like heaven with the AC on.

Wearily leaning against the steering wheel, the short-haired lady in the driver's seat next to me muttered under her breath with a certain sense of fatigue that felt like she was on her way home from work even though it was still morning.

"I-I'm sorry..... B-But, you know! Today, it just so happens that, um..... the bus was delayed, so the students....."

I tried to lie to her using various gestures, but she stopped me with a flat sigh.

"Well, I understand how you feel..... I know you don't like standing out by going to school by car."

"Err..... Yeah....."

"I wanted to respect your feelings for as long as possible, but it's about time, you know..... I thought that I'd have to have this conversation with you sooner or later..."

Since she'd begun to talk in an apologetic manner, I also started to feel like I had to apologize to her.

After a few seconds of silence passed, my eyes drifted toward the clock, and realized that it was almost time for the break after first period.

".....Ah! I have to get going.....! Err, I'll call you later! Sorry!"

If I didn't get in the school right now, I'd end up missing my next class as well.

;After I scooted out of the passenger seat, I turned around and bowed slightly towards the car, and saw her waving at me with a smile that said 'My, my...'

I bowed again at the car as the brake turned off and it started up, and headed along the fence that towered over the schoolyard and building toward the faculty room entrance. I felt sweat collect on my forehead due to the change in temperature from the freezing car I was just in. But because of the trouble I ran into this morning, I was sweating so much that my shirt stuck to my back, so it wasn't

really a big deal to me. Even if I am some sixteen-year-old girl in high school, I'd still most definitely sweat in this heat.

This is worst. I just want to go home and take a shower.

Just as I reached the break in the gate, the bell began to ring.

This is bad. The 10-minute break ended, and the second period of supplementary classes was about to start.

Jogging, I reached the faculty room entrance, and pressed a small intercom button. Within a few seconds, a tiny speaker began to ring.

The typical school chatter that came from this very tiny speaker made it feel like I was in a parallel universe. Just thinking about how I would have to enter this space made me feel incredibly depressed. "How can I help you?"

"Ah, hello! Umm, this is 10th grader, Kisaragi..... I was late for my supplementary lessons, so I was wondering if you could please let me in....."

I wonder how many times I've heard this office lady's voice.

It's only been four months since I've enrolled at this school, but the person I've talked with the most could very well be this person. The fact that the conversations over the intercom might actually account for over 90% of all my conversations was really sad.

"Ah, Kisaragi-san. Well then, I'll open up the gate, so just head to the staff room."

My only salvation was the fact that there was no longer felt the need to ask me for an excuse, get angry, or doubt me.

"I'm sorry..... Thank you....."

I heard the door click as it unlocked, and I pushed it and entered the campus.

The door closed behind me immediately, and was locked once again with a click.

Unlike the outside, a refreshing feeling floated in the air through the school premises. Although it was summer break, the school was open for the students who were doing things like club activities or going to summer classes.

—I had just enrolled at this school this spring.

The year before last year, the four-story school was rebuilt and designed in a western style; a uselessly fashionable building. Like an all-girls school in a shoujo manga..... well, not quite, but a pointlessly beautiful bell had started to ring, and there were fountains, nude statues, and creeks here and there.

There were also some flowers I didn't recognize that formed a tunnel, which surrounded one with a soft rustling sound.

I don't know whose bright idea was it to build such an out-of-place school among a row of buildings in the middle of the city, but although I had thought that this kind of landscape would only create chaos, surprisingly (or not), the school became extremely popular amongst female students and became one of the leading sources of pride within the prefecture.

Although I'd chosen this school based on such an unfantastical reason like, "It was close to my house," I think that it was only due to sheer luck that someone as lacking in academic ability as me actually got accepted.

Because I had missed a depressingly large number of classes, I had to give up my summer vacation to attend supplementary classes. But even if I had gone to class every day, I probably would still have to go to supplementary lessons because of my grades. That was the one thing I was confident about.

And there was no time left.

I went as fast as I could toward the entrance of the faculty room, leaped up the stairs, opened the glass door, and I was once again blessed by the cool air coming from the air conditioning. Now that I was finally in a cool space, I realized just how sweaty I was.

Next to the shoe lockers, I removed my indoor shoes from my bag and hurriedly changed my shoes.

“Uwaa! There’s no time le-.....! ——Ow!!?”

As I folded my shoe bag and reached for the bag for my outdoor shoes, I felt something hard smack me in the head.

I looked up in surprise, and there stood a large man in a white lab coat holding an attendance book.

“Ah..... Uhh... Ahaha..... Good morning?”

“Oh, is it now? Can you even call it ‘morning’ at this hour?”

“I-I guess not~.....”

Crap. I had completely forgotten that the homeroom teacher was in charge of today’s first period supplementary class.

It would have been alright if it was a different teacher, but I couldn’t deceive this person.

“Well, I don’t plan on asking why you’re late. Here, look at this.”

“Huh? What is-..... Ehh?!”

He handed over a paper from the attendance book, and I turned pale at the sight of what was on it.

“Do you know what this is? That’s an easy enough question to begin with, isn’t it?”

“Err, it’s the Bio I test, isn’t it..... The one I did last week.....”

“Oh, so you do know. Now, do you know what the number next to your name means?”

“Erm..... Haha..... I don’t really know what that is~..... Eh–Oww!!?”

I was hit with the attendance book again. The fact that he did it without the sign of any emotion on his face makes me unable to trust him. He’s unavoidable.

“You know..... First off, the fact that the words you chose aren’t quite scientific is fine for now, but only getting 2 points after going to summer school for two weeks? Are you kidding me? Does that mean it’ll take you 100 weeks to get a perfect score?”

The result on the test he handed to me was horrific.

Despite the fact that I had answered all of the questions, there were big, red X’s written everywhere, save for one question.

Such an unrealistic sight nearly made me dizzy.

“B-.....But I studied.....”

“Huh?! What?! You studied for this?! Under ‘Give the name of one animal that can be classified as a mammal,’ you answered ‘crab’ and ‘koi fish.’ How can you say you studied for this?!?”

“Th-That’s because my mom is from Hokkaido..... Wait! I thought about putting ‘deer’ and ‘bear,’ but...”

“That’s it!! Those are correct!!Wait, why are you showing regional pride here?! Furthermore, why did you put two animals even though it says to name one?!?”

“Eh?! Because isn’t it sad if you just leave one?!?”

“Why are bringing such strange logic into a test?! Moreover, if you pair up a deer and a bear like that, wouldn’t the deer get eaten?!!”

“E-Eaten.....?!”

After suffering the wrath of those harsh comments, I looked at my test again.

But, even I myself didn't really know how it happened. Even though I put so much effort into it, my result was really too cruel. What would my mom say if I showed her this..... I didn't want to imagine that.

—It's always been like this.

Strangely enough, no matter what I do, I attract the “eyes” of people around me.

In my later years of elementary school, something I drew just happened to catch the attention of a well-known author. It became the cover of one of their novels, and on top of that, the novel became a huge hit.

When I got to middle school, I joined the art club and entered a contest at the beginning of the year. My work had completely surpassed those of the club president and everyone else and became first in the nation. I could feel people’s eyes gathering upon “*myself*” more and more.

When I got to eighth grade, I didn’t enjoy being in the club anymore, so I decided to quit and spent my time after school aimlessly shopping around town. It was around that time that the number of agencies who scouted me started increasing. I refused them at first, but When the agency that I’m currently working under contacted me, my mom’s work wasn’t going well at the time, so I took up the offer to help a little with the living expenses.

That being said, I never was really a fan of TV or music. But even someone like me couldn’t help but long to stand on a stage and sing as an idol.

My first job as a new idol was to talk on stage as the opening act for my seniors in the agency. Even now, I’m not that good at public speaking, but when I was appointed to that job, I had thought, “For the sake of my family, I absolutely cannot be fired.” There was no other way around it.

To be honest, I was so nervous that I don’t remember what I said during the performance, but it was a big hit in some way. You could even say the outcome was “the best anyone could have imagined.”

The venue had never been so lively before, and I was heavily featured in every magazine, sports page, newspaper, you name it. If there was but one problem, it would be that everyone was talking about me, and not my seniors, who should have been the real stars.

All I did was stand on the stage and talk, but this “nameless new idol” who didn’t even sing or dance was insanely well-liked by the audience. Although the agency rejoiced triumphantly, after that day, the agency’s phones were ringing constantly, so much that there wasn’t even time to breathe between calls. It was, without a doubt, bizarre.

Going beyond logic or common sense, people’s “eyes” gathered upon me without any meaning, reason, or preference at all.

At that time, I realized once again that I wasn’t “*normal*.”

“Oo~oi. I said, ‘are you listening?’”

“.....Huh?! Ah, yes!”

“No, I’m positive weren’t listening at all just now. Are you feeling sick from the summer heat?”

“Ah, no, it’s just that the test took a lot out of me..... Haha.....”

“Took a lot out of you, huh. Anyway, there’s going to be a retake next week so..... Try as hard as you can.”

It was like he was looking at a sad child, staring with eyes full of pity.

“Next week?!” I sighed deeply. “I’ll do my best.....”

I planned to try my hardest this time too.
But I wonder how I'm supposed to try my best from here on out.....



“Well, take it easy. I’m sure that you’re still not used to this school yet, and don’t you have a concert next week?”

“Ah.....! Yes..... I do.....”

He clearly looked depressed now, but seemed to be trying his hardest to not let it show.
He let out a sigh and this time, had a look of relief and gentleness in his eyes.

“Well, don’t push yourself too hard..... Anyway, you should get going now. Didn’t you say you had a filming for a drama today or something?”

“Yes... Ah, wait! Class is going to start! I still have time!”

“It’s written here in the schedule for supplementary lessons, isn’t it? Since it’s Obon, 10th graders only go to first period today. You have the next three days off. Why don’t look at the schedule for once...”

“Ehhh?! Ah, you’re right.....”

Looking at the schedule he took out, there really was only one lesson today.

Don’t tell me he found out that I’ve attending my supplementary classes without looking at the schedule like this.....

“Err..... Well, I’ll see you in three days!”

“Yeah. It would be bad if you didn’t take a break on Obon. Well, I’m going home, so be careful on your way back.”

“I’ll be fine! I’ll take my leave for today!”

I bowed slightly, and stuffing my test as far back as I could, I put in my indoor shoes in an attempt hide it. I put on my outdoor shoes that I had taken off and left the faculty room.

When I opened the door, I was instantly surrounded by the sound of cicadas.

I was once again met with direct sunlight, this time even more brutal than earlier.

The mere thought of walking home from here made me let out a sigh.

“Uwaa..... I-I’ll just go and get something to drink.....”

There was a vending machine in the middle of the road upon leaving the grounds from the faculty room entrance. Once I was thirsty, I couldn’t just stand there and do nothing about it. I went along the colorful path with the gravel crunching beneath my feet on the way to the vending machine.

Near the vending machine was a overhang made from ivy and tree branches that you’d often see in parks, making for a decently large space where you could relax. There several graceful-looking schoolgirls pleasantly chatting at one of the white tables scattered around the area. They probably came as a club for a practice match here, or maybe they were just sightseeing.

The path changed from gravel to soil, and as I set foot into the shaded area, all of the girls turned around and looked my way.

“.....!!”

I instantly flinched, but they didn’t look at me with any hostility or excessive interest.

I thought they had tried smiling slightly at me, but they all quickly left the lounge while whispering and talking under their breaths.

Though I hurriedly tried to smile back, the female students had already left. I was so incredibly embarrassed that I could feel sweat trickle down my skin.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I proceeded toward the vending machine.

The colorful labels were there to make you want to buy their drinks, but there wasn’t even a speck of doubt as to which drink would brighten up my mood right now.

Among the plastic bottled drinks was a bottle with a rather unusual shape. I had kept my eye out for the black carbonated drink.

I took out the pig coin purse that I’ve cherished for many years out of my bag. It snapped open to reveal just enough money to buy the drink.

I dug my hand into the coin purse and started to put my coins into the coin slot.

After I finished paying, everything instantly lit up red as if it was a traffic light that signaled “go.”

I took aim at one of the buttons, slowly extending my finger at it, just like that one scene in a foreign movie I saw when I was a kid where they encounter an unknown alien. It beeped when I pressed the button, and in no time, my drink appeared in the dispenser.

I suddenly had the impulse to put a hand on my hip and gulp it all down on the spot, but being a sixteen-year old maiden, I decided I should take a seat first and take my time to enjoy it. Even while I dangled this punkish drink, the saying “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” still applied here.

I sat at a table a short distance from the vending machine and opened the soda that I was craving.

Up until now, I was adamant about being somewhat deadpan and expressionless, but as I expected, there was nothing I could do about it at this moment. It opened with a slight *shhh* sound and the sweet, unique aroma rose up to my nostrils. If I looked at myself in the mirror right now, I’d probably be

making a face that wouldn't fly by my company's standards, the kind of face that the public would never be allowed to see. I poured the drink that I was dying for down my throat.

Ah..... The people who made this drink must have hated summer.....

This was no mere "drink."

It was now the only way that human beings stood up to the fury of nature known as "heat."

As I felt myself being moved to tears, I had finished my first impression of this drink.

I wondered how refreshing it would be if I slammed the bottle on the table, smacked my lips, and let out a huge "Ahh...!" But I had to contain myself.

To someone passing by, it would just look like a pure and innocent schoolgirl who drank her drink and put the cap on it. However, in my heart, I was brimming with this sense of accomplishment like an old man gulping down some strawberry milk in one go after being done at a bathhouse, who had the impulse to shout, "That was to die for!"

As I finished thoroughly refreshing myself, it seemed that the heat had let up a little, probably because of the deep breath I took, as well as the shade. I started to think a little about my plans for later today.

"I've got time to spare, huh..... Hm?"

When I looked at my watch, it still showed as 8:15 A.M. I was taken aback for a second, but then I remembered that it had stopped this morning. It was my favorite watch that Mom bought for me last year as a birthday present. Its life was too short. I don't remember handling it too roughly as to quicken its death, so it's probably just a dead battery. When I get home, I'll have my stupid brother look at it.

I took out my touch screen phone that had a gaudy pink case. Even though I had a cell phone, I only really used it for work-related things.

If I used it to talk about a favorite T.V. show or about love with a close friend every night, I'd probably be a professional with this device. But when it comes to T.V. shows, I only really watch historical dramas, and I don't even have a friend to talk to about that, let alone love.....

Although I could more or less grasp the reason for that, it wasn't really a bad thing. It's just that each time my phone is in my hand, I find myself hit with an unexplainable feeling of emptiness. That's why I didn't like this device.

"9:30, huh..... The filming is at 2, so I have to be home by 1....."

I tapped the screen of my phone and opened my planner, and the tumultuous business schedule was displayed. Under August 14 was the filming for the drama at 2, a live performance on a radio talk show at 6, and then rehearsal for a concert, all closely written together.

Today, my manager is supposed to come pick me up at my house at 1 o'clock.

Even though I've gotten used to it, my extremely packed schedule recently made me really depressed. The latest concert had gotten everyone talking about me again, and the subsequent deluge of job offers was making a huge change in my lifestyle. It looks like next week's concert that's supposed to commemorate my single which released today is going to be a one-man show, despite it being so soon after my CD's release.

While I *am* happy about it, I've got nothing but bad memories about the song.

The main reason is that on the day of the recording, my manager got extremely mad at me because I had gotten a bad cold and couldn't help but sing in a nasally voice. But the producer loved it and said that it "very well represented the dilemma an adolescent girl would go through facing an unrequited love," and ended up being on the CD.

At the time, I didn't feel like it actually happened due to my fever, but sometime later on, my nasally song started to drift into the town, and my meal sizes got halved. For the time being, things were fine since it was still summer break, but as I thought about how in the world I would face the people at school next semester, I grew even more depressed.

I felt the energy leave my body with a sigh. The suffocating heat didn't help, either.

I had been breaking in and out of a busy sweat, but I could slowly feel my forehead starting to sweat again.

"I guess I should go home....."

There was no point in staying here. I put my phone away in my pocket and stood up from my seat.

I felt a slight cooling sensation as I freed my leg that stuck to the chair and tried to look far off into the distance. On the other side of the school you could hear various shouts and cheering echoing on the grounds.

Those voices, which could probably be called "youth," felt somehow distant from me, and for some reason, made me feel like I was being rushed.

As I began to walk and sighed for the umpteenth time, I found a flyer placed on the table that the schoolgirls were sitting earlier.

It looked like a flyer that came from a new knick-knack shop in front of a train station with characters cluttered together in colorful, round lettering.

The giant "August 13th and 14th" seemed to be jumping out from the paper, which meant that the event was yesterday and today.

After looking around carefully, I picked up the flyer.

And at that moment, I couldn't believe my own eyes.

".....!!!"

In all honesty, I had no interest in a knick-knack shop like this, but this one thing at the very, very bottom, which was probably only there to fill up space on the flyer, was an unbelievably cute charm listed as a "Benisake-chan Strap."

Since the picture was rather small, I could only get the gist of what it looked like, but just by the silhouette of the legs that were clearly in a place where legs shouldn't be, I could tell that it held exceptional talent.

I swallowed the drool that was pooling in my mouth, and anxiously checked my surroundings again. If you looked at the flyer, you could clearly see "Limited time offer!" written, although it wasn't very clear what the offer was for.

I stood there for a second and stuffed the flyer in my bag.

With my hand on my hip, I drank what was left in my bottle, threw it in the trash can, and quickly left the school. —

*

—Running at full speed under the blazing sun left me dizzy.

I ran away to an alley in a housing complex that were so convoluted, I felt as if I was walking through a maze. It had gotten somewhat cooler, probably because of the shade, but there was no time left to think about that.

My breath came in ragged gasps.

As I put both my hands on a wall and hung my head, sweat fell drop by drop, leaving marks on the

ground.

I dropped my bag and sunk to the ground.

I panted heavily, stretching out my breathing intervals.

My head slowly started to process the conversation from earlier, and this time my eyes started to well with tears.

Pressing my back against the wall, I hugged my knees.

I wanted to cry as loud as I could, but if my voice were heard, it would only lead to trouble.

I pressed my face against my bag, but I started to cry uncontrollably.

Why did it turn out this way?

Things would be better if I didn't have this ability.

I just wanted to talk to people like a normal person, go shopping like a normal person, and live like a normal person.

My existence is meaningless. I wish I could just disappear.

Or rather, I wish I could live a life where no one would find me, then die alone——!

*

Let's go back a little.

After leaving school, I changed into what I thought were pretty plain clothes in the park bathroom.

But, just as I went out into the street on the way to the station, dozens of eyes were on me.

"This is bad," I thought, but it was already too late.

It had just become the time of day where more people started to gather and I hadn't planned ahead for this.

In an instant, a crowd had gathered and I couldn't even move an inch behind or in front of me.

Everyone took their phones out and started pointing their cameras toward me.

The layers of people thickened in the blink of an eye as I stared in a daze at the cameras coming from all 360 degrees.

Did I do something wrong?

Indeed, it was my fault for not being self conscious enough.

But still, even so, I wanted to seem like a regular girl, just a little.

That was all I wanted.

The various sounds of shutters going off and people murmuring mixed together was a cacophony I've never heard before. There was so much going on that it made me feel nauseous. Just as I felt myself sinking to the ground, a police car's siren drowned out the noise.

The sidewalk I was on wasn't a narrow one at all, but it seemed like someone had called the police due to the crowd extending into the road and blocking it. But even so, the people didn't budge. Instead, I felt like the siren was attracting more people like a giant billboard.

And the one who brought all of them here was me.

All of their "eyes" were looking at me.

A few policemen managed to break through the crowd and came up to me.

One of them uttered something while putting their hand on my shoulder, and I jumped in the slight gap that was made in between people in the crowd.

I tried to head directly in front of me, but even that seemed like an endless tunnel.

The road became narrower as I was being squished by the squirming crowd.

I blindly reached my hand out and felt it being pulled by someone.

The next thing I knew, the street suddenly cleared up and I could see again.

Did someone save me? I didn't have the time to make sure.

I took off running and looked back to see an immense amount of people merged into what looked like one giant creature chasing after me.

Although there were less people when I ran to the alley, each and every one of them ran after me with their phones in hand.

I became hopelessly lost in the unfamiliar street, burying myself farther into the labyrinth with each step.

I concentrated so hard that I could no longer tell what was up and what was down.

"Ah.....!"

The narrow road led to a dead end.

I hastily looked back, but from the looks of it, retreat was not an option.

—My chest felt like it was on fire.

My thoughts stopped and I stood still, when my phone suddenly began to ring.

I looked at the screen to see it was my manager.

I nervously picked up the phone, and my manager began to speak on the other end, anger seeping into her voice.

"Hello?! Where are you right now?!"

"I-I don't know..... U-Um, I....."

"I got a call from the police, the agency is in a huge frenzy right now! Ah..... Why did this have to happen at such an critical time....."

"U-Um, I-I'm sorr-....."

"Do you know what kind of person you are?! Listen!! You're not '*normal*,' so you understand that these kinds of things will happen, right?!"

".....not"

"Huh?! Did you say something? If you can hear me, then say something.....!"

"A-Am I really not that normal?! Even though I disguised myself well..... They looked at me as...as if I were some kind of freak.....! I-I'm sick of this! I can't even go home anymore.....! Th-Thanks for everything up until now!!"

"Huh.....?! Ah, Wai—"

Ignoring my manager, I ended the call.

I was finally able to catch my breath, but I still hadn't had processed what I just said.

At the very least, I was certain I said something rather serious, and I was supposed to have understood just how many people I have ended up inconveniencing at that moment. Still, calling them back and apologizing was the one thing I just could not bring myself to do.

While I heard the ceaseless sounds of cicadas, the sound of a car running in the distance, and felt the faint vibration of an air vent along the wall, I wondered how much time had passed.

There was no sign that anyone had chased me all the way to the alley where I sat myself down, unable to move an inch—the only thing passing by was time.

Did they already tell my mom what happened?

She always supported me and no one else was happier than her when my CD release dates were chosen.

In the end, I've just been thinking about myself and getting all these people involved.....
As a feeling of helplessness welled up, tears came to my eyes and fell one by one.
I thought it would be better if I went somewhere far away, but I probably still wouldn't be able to escape people's eyes no matter where I went. Even I realized that I really wasn't "*normal*."

I was suddenly hit even more with a sense of insecurity and anxiety.
I moved my bag out of my face, and the second I looked up, my heart jumped at what I saw.

"U-.....Uwaaahhh!!"

My body couldn't keep up with the sudden movement and I completely lost my balance, falling right on my butt with a loud thud.

A person stood at the alley's exit, turning it into a dead end.

Even though it was the middle of summer, they were completely covered in a long-sleeved hoodie, and from the hood their long hair swayed in a flowing motion.

What surprised me most was that they were standing so close that I could simply reach out and touch them.

Had they followed me all the way here while concealing the sound of their footsteps? If that's the case, then without a doubt, this was a really bad situation to be in.

Taken aback, I opened my mouth, but I couldn't get a sound out.

My knees felt so weak that I couldn't even stand, and it occurred to me that this was an incredibly dangerous situation.

"Ah, wait..... Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you or anything like that....."

I heard a kind of husky, yet soothing and feminine voice from her hood.

".....Huh?"

I accidentally let out a ridiculous-sounding voice, as if my mind were a zoetrope that started turning at random.

When I tried to look at her face again, I saw that she had very nice features and pale skin.

I had assumed that she was a guy due to her mannerisms, but..... even if she was, I'm certain that she would still be considered extremely beautiful compared among girls.

While I was still sitting on the ground, she squatted to my level, glanced around us, and started to speak in a low voice.

"I saw that..... What happened earlier. It was quite the eye-catcher."

"Wh-what do you mean by 'that'.....?"

"That little commotion that happened on the sidewalk. But you know, I never would have thought that it would bring in that much attention....."

She saw the commotion earlier..... Which means, this person followed me all the way here from there?

If that's true, then is she one of the people I attracted back there.....?

The dejected feeling I had up until just a while ago began to well up again, except this time with a little bit of anger.

"I-I quit my job, so.....! P-.....Please don't chase after me anymore!! U-Umm, I can give you my signature, if that's all you want....."

I said it. I firmly said my own thoughts, didn't I?

Just by clearly saying this alone, I'm sure that this cool and collected person would be able to understand.

Now, it would be nice if I could just give her a signature and have her leave and be on her merry



way.....

I timidly opened my eyes so I could see her reaction, and it was as if she had “I have no idea what you’re saying” written across her face.

“Ahh..... Well, I wasn’t really chasing after you and I don’t need your signature. Wait, you quit your job.....?”

Her response was far different from anything I was expecting.

She wasn’t chasing after me? If she’s not one of my fans.....

I felt myself able to relax again, but that feeling didn’t last long.

If she’s not a fan, then could she be a kidnapper?

Does she plan on taking me for ransom?! I can’t even escape, I’m in a huge pinch here!!

However, this person didn’t assault me, but just stood there with her hands in her pockets.

She then took out her phone, which was plain with no case.

“You still have time before your appointment. It’s rather convenient that you happened to make it here by chance.”

“Huh? A-Appointment.....?

“Hm? I’m pretty sure it was supposed to be at 1..... Am I wrong?”

I also took out my phone and tried to look at the screen. The amount of missed calls and voicemails I had received was unbelievable.

The appointment..... at 1.....

“Ah.....”

At that moment, I understood everything.

This person was part of the staff for the drama filming.

That was the perfect explanation for why someone who wasn't a fan would follow me all the way here from the commotion earlier.

Based on the fact that she knew I was supposed to meet up with my manager at 1, that had to be it.

They probably heard about the commotion I caused and was told to bring me to the filming so that I could make it in time.

However, I couldn't bring myself to just tell her "Is that so? Got it," and follow her to the shoot.

I had clearly told this person earlier, "I quit my job."

The fact that she was disregarding that and telling me to go with her was, well, natural of course, but I didn't want to just do as she said.

As she walked toward the alley's exit, I turned towards her and managed to stand up and speak to her.

"Um..... I already quit my job. I don't feel like going back, at least not for a while. So, err, do you understand.....?"

This time I calmly told her, more clearly than before. I'm sure that she understood me this time.

".....Ahh, we've already made preparations for you. So just come along with me."

She looked me straight in the eye and said that with a kind of gentle expression.

I could probably escape somewhere right now, but her saying "we've made preparations for you," and the look on her face while saying it made me unable to do so.

I'm sure that if I went now, my manager would come.

And I couldn't be more certain that my manager would be tremendously angry.

I started to tear up again at the thought of the inevitable lecture that would make great claims about the future I had just thrown away.

But, I had to tell her without any hesitation.

Today, I'll put an end to it.

I'll tell them my feelings, have them be as angry with me as they can be, and have that be the end of it.

Once again I braced myself, and just when I caught up to the staff member, I realized that the part of my bag where I pressed my face was damp from where I sobbed into it.

"Eu.....gh....."

"Hm? What's up?"

"Ah, no..... It's nothing....."

".....That so? Well, you should wash your clothes and that bag later."

My face became fiery hot, and I swore you could hear a pop from my face as if steam had started to rush out of my ears.

"Uu..... Okay....."

What a keen and perceptive person. I bet they're this astute when it comes to work too.

Be that as it may, with all the running around I did today, I want nothing more than to take a shower, I thought, as I followed the hoodie-wearing girl at a small distance.

After exiting the blind alley, a right. After two intersections, a left. A right at the next small road and a left immediately after.....

For ten minutes we walked, the other girl not saying a word.

I didn't even know there was a place in this town that was like this. It seemed more and more like I had stepped foot into some backwoods place.

I knew that today's filming was supposed to be a scene where I go to hang out at "a not so well-off friend's house."

Indeed, the condos and apartments here weren't exactly the greatest.

I wondered if they had already made most of the preparations for the filming. If so, how would I break it to them?

My stomach began to toss and turn from the stress.

"Over here."

The girl in the hoodie suddenly stopped and changed direction.

However, the road we were on up until now looked a lot nicer than this narrow, dimly lit path she led me to.

It looked like only one person could pass through this path at a time, and we would squished on both sides between a huge wooden fence and the wall of an apartment complex.

"I-It's rather narrow, isn't it.....?"

I said to her, but she continued on silently without replying. I had no other choice but to reluctantly follow her. Was this a shortcut to the filming site? This felt like one strange occurrence after another.....

Walking through the alley, I felt unusually trapped.

What on earth would we do if we ran into a giant bug?

I proceeded cautiously while looking down at her feet, when suddenly I saw the shoes of the girl in the hoodie, who had been walking in front of me all the while, making me stop in a fluster.

"This is it."

As she spoke, she pointed at a door right in the middle of the path with the numbers "107" on it. The wooden fence stopped just where that space was.

"Huh?! Th-This is it?!"

She opened the door and let herself inside before I finished speaking.

"U-Umm..... Hey-?!"

The door slammed shut behind her, and I was left just standing there.

I carefully tried to look outside the building, but the only thing visible above the wooden fence was a concrete wall. There wasn't even a window or anything there.

It was like it was a warehouse or an above-ground shelter, not a residence. But for some reason, the door had "107" written on it.

"So this..... really isn't 'a friend's house,' huh?"

If this were a friend's house, I'm certain that that friend's parents would be doing some sort of shady biological research. While it is possible that the second episode of this drama could be about me going to the house of some parents doing mysterious biological research, based on the events of the first episode it would be an incredibly unthinkable development.

The exterior looked shady, but for some reason I was compelled to open the door.

The fact that this door had "107" on it even though there were no other doors around..... definitely seemed like some foul play.

"I mean..... I don't know how to get home from here, so I guess have no choice but to go inside..... Yeah..."

My curiosity irrepressible, I took one breath and opened the door. As expected, it looked nothing like a house that belonged to a friend who's a girl in high school.

When I opened the door, I saw a fifteen-mat room spread all the way to the back.

A glass table and a sofa were illuminated by a countless exposed lightbulbs hanging from an exposed pipe that ran along the ceiling. There was a small antique armoire with a globe and charming little trinkets on it, which really made this place feel like a secret hideout.

There were also general household appliances like a TV, microwave, fridge, and a computer in this air-conditioned room, giving it a sort of lived-in feeling.

But there were antiquarian books that clearly weren't from Japan neatly lined up on an aged bookshelf, which instead gave it a mysterious atmosphere which made me think it might be more accurate to call it a modern witch's workshop.

On the far wall were four doors. Rooms in the back? What was even going on with this building?

Just by the door was a kitchen, well-furnished with cooking utensils, where the girl was standing. I looked around and unsurprisingly, there was no filming equipment or staff in sight.

The bad feeling I'd had from the second we arrived here was slowly becoming reality.

"U-Ummm..... What in the world is....."

"Kano, this is the one. Go and explain everything to her..... Hey, wake up!"

Still paying no attention to my questions, the girl in the hoodie tried to talk to the person sprawled on the couch.

I thought I saw them him flinch ever so slightly, when I started to heard a drowsy voice.

"Uhgh..... Hm? Huh? Who's this girl?"

When he lifted his face, the magazine that was draped over it shifted slightly, revealing the face of a half-asleep, cat-eyed boy.

"She's the newcomer you said would come today. Didn't you say you wanted to get this done yourself?"

"Wait-Huh.....? So why is she....."

"Are you still half-asleep?! Just hurry up and explain everything."

He sighed. "Oh well. Okay."

The boy named Kano got up from the sofa, stared at me, looked as if he just thought of something, and suspiciously let a small grin go across his face.

"Huh? Wait, U.....Um——"

"Welcome, newcomer, to our Mekakushi-dan! Thank you for taking on this new mission!"

He got up from the sofa and his grin was different from the one before, this one being more refreshing, but he started to speak in an exaggerated manner as if he were trying to avoid my questions.

"Basically, what we do is elude the "eyes" of the police and infiltrate dangerous facilities to borrow various things from them. I'll tell you the details later. Well, there are probably some things I won't tell you, but if you'll forgive me for that, I think I'm going to tell you a decent amount. So, this is our hideout. You probably already figured that out for yourself. The one who made it look so blatantly like a hideout is the one sitting here with the unpleasant look in her eyes..... Oops, how scary! Nah, that's just how our leader Kido's taste is. So don't be so nervous, and feel free to make yourself at home. As for the members, there's the leader, then me..... Ah, my name is Kano; and there are two others..... Well there might be three now, but for now that's how many members there are. Usually we don't really openly do these kinds of things but we sort of casually do things that seem like that. Oh, and then....."

“Wa-wait!! Wait just a second! Err..... Meka... what.....? Dangerous facilities.....? Y-You’re talking about today’s drama, right?! Where’s the director.....? I..... c-came to say I quit being an idol today! But..... Who exactly..... are you guys?!”

My head couldn’t take in all of this sudden new information at once. There were too many things I wanted to ask.

Is this some sort of scene.....? No, there’s no way it is.

The script that I had was just a boring school romance story.

There wasn’t even a sign of infiltrating any dangerous facilities in the storyline, to say the least.

I accidentally ended up knowing their secrets because he talked about it all so straightforwardly, but clearly they’ve gotten the wrong person..... Taking on a mission.....? I didn’t hear anything about this “mission” he’s talking about. Ah, but a second job wouldn’t be so bad, I’ve always wanted to try having a part-time job at least once.

“.....Wait a second. You said you’re an idol.....? Hey, wh-what’s the meaning of this, Kano?!”

The girl in the hoodie who was called the leader Kido, or something, pressed the person named Kano who just smiled at my questions for answers.

“Huh? Like she said, she’s the super popular idol that everyone’s been talking about lately. Here, look.”

He opened up the magazine that was on his face while he was lying down and showed it to her.

There was an article featuring my new single that was released today. Agh, that was the worst photo, even for me. Even though it was a two page spread, my eyes were half open..... It was terrible.....

With a *fwip* he closed the magazine and put it away, and the girl in the hoodie quickly looked back and forth at the magazine and me and turned pale.

“Wh-..... Hey, you said you were going to meet up with a potential newcomer and wait and see what happens..... And if they were interested you wanted to let them join.....”

“Yeah, I said that. That was a lie.”

“You said it seemed interesting..... This person’s an idol you know!! ——Wait, you lied?!”

She waved the magazine like crazy right where my face was while she mentioned me.

To do that in front of the actual person..... How terrible.....

“You know, I told you before that it was a lie, but you didn’t reply because you’re always listening to music. Furthermore, weren’t you the one who went and brought her own your own? Isn’t it your own fault?”

“You wouldn’t wake up no matter what happened, so I went and got her myself!! Moreover, if you woke up, why didn’t you call me?!”

“Because even if I called your phone, you’re always listening to music so you wouldn’t answer. It’s kind of frustrating and troublesome trying to call you anyway.”

“I’m telling you.....”

“——E-Excuse me!!”

Their heads simultaneously turned toward me. The person named Kano was still smiling, while the other person named Kido had a relentless expression on her face.

“U-.....Um, are you guys okay with getting someone other than who you were looking for.....?”

When I hesitantly asked this, the girl named Kido shook her head vigorously within her hood, and started talking with a sigh.

“Ahh..... Looks like I did. Sorry, it was my bad. So you should go home now—.....”

She looked as if she realized something when she said that much, and her face went pale again. At the same time, the person named Kano sitting on the couch started giggling to himself.

“You...!! Why did you tell her all that if you knew you had the wrong person?! We can’t let her leave now that you’ve gone as far as telling her about what we do!”

“Ahaha..... Well, that was because you kept telling me to hurry up and explain. Aha~, damn, this is all just way too fun——”

The person named Kano only managed to say so much before he was dealt a heavy blow to the head. The girl named Kido glared in my direction, her previously expressionless face drastically changing to one that seemed both panicked and angry. Even when seeing her face like that, only calm thoughts like, *She seems about my age. Maybe a year or two older, at most.....* came to mind.

Although it probably would have been more appropriate for me to feel a certain amount of anxiousness at that time, since I didn’t sense that at all from these two, instead, I felt pretty relaxed. It was true that they were some kind of organization with a hideout and did suspicious things, but I had a feeling that that they weren’t bad people.

“U-Umm.....”

In any case, I started to ask about something, but once again, I was cut off.

“So, what’s your name?”

“Huh?”

Sighing, the girl named Kido asked me that question and then sat down next to the one named Kano.

“I said, what’s your name? You can call me Kido. And the overly-cheerful one here is Kano.”

As I’d thought, her speaking pattern and demeanor gave off a kind of androgynous impression.

The “overly-cheerful” person sitting beside her waved at me with a grin on his face. Although he had a mature air about him, once I looked closer, I noticed that he also seemed pretty close to my age.

“Ah, um, I’m Kisaragi Momo, sixteen years old.....”

When asked for my name, I instinctively answered with my age, too. It’s not really a habit or anything, but I was worried that it sounded like what I’d say for an idol audition.

If I claimed something like, “I’m an idol so I can’t help it (heh),” they probably wouldn’t ever let go of that. Ahh, what would I do..... That would be so embarrassing.

“Kisaragi, huh? So you really are an idol... You even say your age when you introduce yourself.”

This is the worst.

“No! It’s not that! I didn’t just say it out of habit or because I was thinking of this as an audition or anything like that! It just happened to come out!! You see, I don’t have any friends at all, so when I talk to people I get a little over-excited and end up blurting out weird things! Ahaha..... haha.....”

The silence was painful. I wished I could just crawl into a hole and stay there forever.

“I see..... S-Seems like you have it pretty rough.”

“Y-Yeah.....”

I was being comforted.

The person named Kano started snickering again, and this time, Kido-san hit him in the stomach to shut him up.

“Anyway, I’m not sure what to do now..... To be honest, I’m all for letting you go as soon as possible, but after all we’ve just told you, it would be bad for us if you left right now.”

“So it would seem..... Judging from from I’ve heard.....”

“It’s all this idiot’s fault.”

“Ahaha, but I’ve been saying that’s because of Kido’s mistake..... or, not.”

As soon as Kido-san turned to look at him, he immediately corrected himself while crossing his arms protectively over his stomach.

“But you know, it’s not like this situation is full of only bad things. I just happened to see it through an online livestream, but that ‘ability’ is pretty amazing.”

Online.....? Livestream.....? Was it a video of when I’d caused a commotion? It had spread to a lot of people, then, as I’d feared.

“Amazing? You mean her?”

“Yep. Say, you’ve had that condition of gathering attention even before you became an idol, right?”

“Eh?! Y-Yes, that’s..... correct.....”

I was caught a bit off guard by it being called a “condition.”

Watching my reaction, Kano-san made a face that seemed to say, “I see.”

“From what I’ve seen, it’s a pretty tough ability to have, right? I’m amazed you decided to be an idol in spite of that.”

He acted like he already knew everything about me, giving me the strange feeling that he could read my thoughts.

“My mother was having some trouble with her job at the time, so I wanted to help out somehow, but..... How do you.....?”

“Hm? Ah, I just figured, I guess? Even if you *are* a super popular idol, that was a rather ‘unusual’ way of attracting people’s attention. It’s like the complete opposite of Kido. If Marie had a condition like yours, she probably would’ve died by now. Ahaha!”

“Marie’s a special case. And anyway, their circumstances are completely different.”

“Yeah, guess you’ve got a point. Ah, come to think of it, I haven’t seen her for a while. Is she still mad?”

“Um..... I-I’m not sure I follow the conversation anymore.....”

I was beyond confused. They didn’t seem like bad people, but who exactly were they? And what was going to happen to me from now on?

“Ahh, sorry, sorry. Err, well, why don’t you have a seat first.”

“Ah, right.....”

He gestured to the sofa across from them, on the other side of the table.

Once I sat down in front of Kano-san, for some reason, it suddenly felt like we were having a counseling session.

“To put it really simply, as Kido just explained, there would be a lot of problems if we let you leave right now. So we’d like you to stay here for the time being. Now, we understand that this might inconvenience you, so we’re offering you a bargain, or rather, a proposal.”

“A-A proposal?”

“Right. Basically, we’ll cure this condition of yours. Or to be precise, ‘suppress’ it. We can help you do that. That is, only if you want us to. Kido, that’s about all we can do, right?”

“Well..... I guess so. In any case, we can’t let her leave right now.”

Those were the most unbelievable words I have heard all that day.

The reason being that it was my first time meeting people that wanted to do something about my

condition.

But naturally, I couldn't believe what they were saying so easily.

Judging from what they'd said earlier, it was possible they were only saying this to mess with me.

First off, how were they going to "cure" my condition when it's not exactly an illness?

I'd already tried everything I could think of. I was all out of ideas.

"W-Well..... Of course, I'd be glad if it could be cured, but....."

"Ah, so you *do* want to cure it. I mean, it's pretty clear that you can't control it. Well, every person has things that work well for them and other things that don't, so I'm sure it'll work out if you just experiment a bit."

"Experiment.....

Would I really be able to trust this person?

I'd only just met him, knew nothing about his background, and it sounded that he was involved in some shady business.

But even so, I had never met anyone who had offered to fix my condition.

The faint hope of "becoming normal" had grown strong enough for me to rely on a complete stranger.

"Ah..... This really brings me back. I once said the same thing to Kido."

After studying my face, Kano-san closed his eyes as if recalling something.

"Yeah, I think you might have."

"Kido was still so cute back then~..... She said to me, 'At this rate, I'll disappear~ Please help me~'—Ow, ow!"

Before he could finish speaking, Kido-san reached out to grab his side. Was it okay to only keep targeting that one area.....?

"It would have been better if I'd made you disappear first."

Even with Kido-san twisting his side like that, Kano-san kept on smiling.

"Well anyway, reminiscing aside..... Even if we tell you that we'll 'cure' you, you probably won't believe us so, Kido, go on and demonstrate."

"Why me? You do it."

"But mine's harder to understand, right? Marie's would be the simplest, but I'm positive she's still mad right now, so it's too much of a pain to ask her to do it."

She sighed. "Alright, fine. I guess I do have to take some responsibility here."

Kido-san said with a sigh, and standing up, walked off towards one of the doors in the back of the room. When she opened the second door from the right, I caught sight of a simplistic bed inside.

"Um..... What exactly did you want to show me?"

"Ah, well, just some proof to show why I said we might be able to cure that condition of yours, you know? I think it'll be pretty easy to understand once you see it....."

Proof? What could it be, I wondered. Were they bringing in someone that they'd successfully cured from a condition like mine?

It wasn't exactly like a diet, where you could easily see the result by comparing a before and after image.....

As I thought this, the door slammed closed, and Kido-san disappeared into the room.

Kano-san was grinning as usual. I guessed he was just going to wait for Kido-san to bring someone(?) back.

I also decided to wait, curious to see who was going to come.

.....However, even after more than a minute passed, Kido-san still hadn't come back.

I looked around at the cuckoo clock and digital clock hanging on the wall. To be honest, it didn't feel like time was going by very slowly, like it tended to do when you didn't know what you were waiting for.

Kano-san, who was still smiling as before, had started casually leafing through a magazine. The door didn't seem like it was going to open again anytime soon, making me start to wonder what I was even sitting here for anymore.

“——Um, excuse me..... Uwaaaaahh!!”

Just as I looked over at Kano-san to ask what we were waiting for, my eyes fell upon an unbelievable sight, and I couldn't help but scream.

Next to Kano-san, who was flipping through the pages of his magazine, was Kido-san, sitting in the exact same position as before.

If she had walked here from the door in plain sight, I wouldn't have jumped up from my seat like I had.

“H-.....H-H-How did you....?! When did you-?!”

Kido-san looked at me with cold, disapproving eyes when she saw me jump up in such surprise that I almost fell behind the sofa.

“Anyway, it's something like this! Did that scare you?!”

Kano-san said cheerfully, watching me clinging onto the back of the sofa.

She sighed again. “Aren't you overreacting a bit? Stop looking like you've just seen a ghost.”

“Well, you pretty much are like a ghost though—ow!”

Even after he was punched into the stomach again, Kano-san never stopped smiling. At this point, I was starting to think that he felt some kind of pride or something in being able to keep a smile on face.

“Wh-What was that just now?”

Sitting back down for the time being, I tried asking about what I'd just seen happen.

To be honest, I was still pretty spooked by Kido-san, and couldn't bring myself to look directly at her.

“Kido is just like you. Well, it's more that she's the complete opposite of you. Ever since she was small, she's had a condition that makes her ‘invisible’ to other people.”

I could hardly believe what Kano-san was saying.

“I think you've realized now that you've seen it, but you didn't even notice her there, right? I guess you could say it's like a continuous state.”

I hadn't noticed at all.

It was like she'd reappeared in the mere second that I'd looked away.

I felt like I'd just seen some kind of magic trick.

“But she eventually started practicing so that she could control it, and well, now she can. So, this is proof that we might be able to help suppress your condition——”

I slammed my hands on the table and leaned forward.

“I’m willing to stay here!! H-Housework, or anything else I can do, I’ll do it!! And those operations you mentioned earlier, I’ll do my best at those, too!! So please let me join your.... Mekameka-dan!”
I couldn’t give up on the world just yet.

Up until that day, there had been a lot of tough times because of my condition, but for the first time in my life, my heart was fluttering at the hope brought on by this huge opportunity.

If I stayed here, my condition was sure to be cured.

I’d be able to go shopping like a normal person, talk like a normal person, and make friends, just like a normal person!

“R-really.....? I’m glad to hear that! Yeah, and it’s actually called the Mekakushi-dan. It’s important that you get it right.”

“Mekakushi-dan!! I’ll do my best!”

“Can’t we stop using that weird-ass name? It’s not like we have many opportunities to introduce ourselves, anyway.”

Kido-san muttered after watching my excitable exchange with Kano-san.

“But Mekakushi-dan sounds cool! I’m looking forward to working together, Leader!”

“Wh-What’s gotten into you all of a sudden..... W-Well, anyway, we’re glad to have you here with us, Kisaragi.”

“Y..... Yeah!”

“Oh, I know how it is. Say what you like, but since no one’s ever called you Leader before, you’re actually really happy n——Ow! That hurts!”

Ahh..... This time, his arm was being twisted at a weird angle..... But he was still smiling!

So maybe Kano-san really did have some kind of pride about smiling.

With a weak smile, I watched the exchange between the two, something I’d already gotten used to in my short time here, when suddenly, one of the doors in the back of the room—the one on the far right—opened.

The one that came out was a petite girl with white hair, who looked like she’d come straight out of a story book.

“Hm? Ah, so you’ve finally decided to come out, huh? Hey, Marie....”

The girl called by that name turned towards us, and making a face like she’d just seen a monster, immediately went back into the room.

“.....Can’t say I didn’t see that coming.”

“Just as expected, huh? Marie’s so easy to understand~”

“Ahh, sorry ‘bout that. That was Marie just now. I’d like to introduce her to you as soon as possible, but.....”

“U-Um..... She doesn’t seem to like me.....”

“No, she’s like that with everyone she meets, so don’t take it personally. Kano, go call her over here.”

“Ehhh~? I don’t wanna. I don’t wanna piss her off and have to deal with ‘you-know-what.’”

“It’s your fault that she’s in a bad mood in the first place. This is what happens when you crack up just because she was wearing socks that were a little different from usual.”

“But they were just so weird, you know? On the other hand, Kido, you were pretending to no reaction

at all."

"A-At least I didn't laugh or say anything about it! It was better to have just shown no reaction to it." "No way, Marie came out wearing those socks expecting some kind of reaction, so it's the same either way, isn't it?Anyway, it doesn't make a difference at this point, so go call her over. You're just trying to make me go to say that it was my fault, right?"

"What're you.....?!"

"Come on now. In times like these, it's safer for it to be girl-to-girl."

Letting out a sigh, she said "Fine, I'll go. But you're on your own with whatever happens after I call her out."

Kido-san stood up, headed for the back of the room, and opened the door that the girl named Marie had disappeared behind.

"Auu?!"

The moment the door opened, we heard a blunt sound accompanied by a small scream. The door opened all the way, and I saw the girl from earlier in tears and clutching her forehead.

Apparently, she had been standing behind the door the whole time, so when Kido-san suddenly opened it, she had hit her head on the door. When Kido-san pointed towards us, the girl glanced over, and still in tears, shook her head frantically.

"U-umm..... It really seems like she's doesn't like me all that much...."

"Nah, Marie's just extremely shy..... Still, looks like Kido's having a hard time convincing her after all."

Kano-san didn't seem particularly concerned about the situation; he was already flipping casually through the pages of his magazine again.

Because of how Kido-san's desperate persuasion attempts were still dragging on, I could hear snippets of the conversation from the open door. I could only barely make them out, but the girl's clearly negative words, such as "I'm scared" and "I can't," stabbed into my heart each time.

"Um..... If it doesn't seem possible, then....."

As I turned to Kano-san and started to say this, we heard the sound of the door slamming closed. Kido-san was standing in front of the door, and the girl named Marie was hiding behind her.

Her white hair, which reached all the way down to her waist, looked as soft and fluffy as an animal's, and I couldn't help imagining how nice it would feel nice to bury my face in it.

"Ah, looks like she was able to convince her after all. I'd expect no less from our leader."

Closing the magazine that he'd been reading, Kano-san clapped his hands a bit in applause.

Kido-san came back over and sat down in the exact same spot as before, and the girl also seated herself in between Kido-san and Kano-san.

Looking at her from up close, she really did look just like a doll..... With pale pink eyes, skin paler than Kido-san's, and long, pretty white hair, she looked like a character straight out of a fairy tale.

But despite her cute appearance, she continued to keep her face hidden, staring at an empty space on the table with swirling eyes, and chanting like a spell, just loud enough for me to be able to hear, "I'm okay..... I'm okay....." over and over again.

"Sorry that we kept you waiting. This is Marie."

Her shoulders shook at the sound of her name, and she looked up very slowly.

She seemed to be quite the introverted type. As the new member, I had to be sure to leave a good first

impression!

"I-It's nice to meet you, Marie-san! U-Um, I'm Kisaragi! Starting today, I'll be staying here for the time being! U-Um, I'll do my best, so I hope we can get along!"

The moment I opened my mouth, her shoulders stiffened up again, but it looked like what I'd said had gotten across, because by the time I finished talking, her expression seemed more relaxed than before.

"....."

Even so, Marie-san was still frozen in the same position as before.

"Umm..... Ahaha..... W-Well, that's about it....."

I awkwardly tried to smooth things over to avoid silence as much as possible. But once it got really quiet, I had no idea what to say to recover. Maybe I should buy a book on communication theory for next time.....

But, much to my surprise, the silence was short-lived.

"I-I'm..... Marie..... N-Nice to meet you....."

I realized that she was introducing herself, but her voice was so quiet, and she paused frequently between words.

Marie-san's eyes started swirling again, and her pale skin was turning bright pink all the way up to her ears.

"I-I'll go make some tea!!"

Seeming to have reached her limits, Marie-san stood up and quickly walked off towards the kitchen.

"Ah! Y-You don't have to!"

Just when I thought I'd finally got her to talk to me, she'd been so quick to leave her seat.....

"Wow..... Marie really pulled it off."

"I was surprised she talked that much in front of someone she'd only met for the first time."

The two of them were exchanging words of praise for Marie-san.





“Huh?! Really?!”

I couldn't help but ask, while hiding my surprise at the fact that conversation just now (which could hardly be called a conversation) counted as having talked a lot.

“Well, that being said, you're probably only about the fourth person she's ever talked so, that probably doesn't count for much.”

“The fourth?! U-Um, what kind of lifestyle does Marie-san have.....?”

“Lifestyle, huh..... Hmm..... Well, to put it in contemporary terms, I guess you could say she's a NEET?”

Kano-san looked at Kido-san as he said this.

“Yeah. Plus, she barely ever leaves her room, so you could also call her a shut-in.....”

“Ah..... Is that so.....? W-Wow, I had no idea.....”

Although it was me who has asked in the first place, I felt kind of bad for Marie-san, who had been so casually exposed as a shut-in.

“But we should probably do something about her soon, you know? I mean, it's already her second year of being a hikineet.....”

“How many times have we discussed this by now? Every time we bring it up, she just stops talking completely.”

“Well, yeah..... Hm? What's wrong, Kisaragi-chan?”

“Ah! N-No, it's..... nothing.....”

Hearing the words “second year of being a hikineet” made me think of something, and it must have shown in my expression somehow, because Kano-san had peered curiously at my face.

He looked confused when I dismissed the question, but it didn't seem like he was going to pry any further.

“Anyway, I think Kisaragi joining will do her some good, too.”

“Yeah. She seems pretty happy about it.”

“Huh?! Really? I-..... It doesn't really seem that way to me, though.....”

“Well I mean, Marie's taken out two of her favorite cups. She never lets us use them, so I'm sure that one's for you, Kisaragi-chan.”

I looked over at the kitchen and saw Marie-chan frantically making the preparations for tea. She had taken out four cups and set them out on a tray.

I couldn't tell how much they were worth just by looking, but while two of the cups were plain, the other two had fancy pictures of animals printed on them.

“Ah.....”

That made me so happy.

Marie-san, who probably wasn't very good at dealing with people, had brought out her favorite cups just for me.

I was sure that this was her way of welcoming me.

I felt my chest tighten a bit.

Come to think of it, it felt like such a long time since I'd last talked to a girl around my age.

Even at school, because to my irregular job and my condition, I hardly had the chance to talk to people face-to-face.

“I was a bit worried, but looks like you two are going to get along better than I expected. I guess it's

true what they say about girls getting along best with other girls! Finally, it's going to be more radiant around here——”

Kano-san glanced over at Kido-san and saw that she seemed to be sulking a bit.

I realized the reason for that right away, and soon after, Kano-san did as well.

“Yeah, that’s true..... Seeing that I’m like this, I’m not even the least bit feminine, either..... Really, so sorry to disappoint you.....!”

“What?! No, wait, hold on! What’re you saying! I mean, even Kido secretly changes the conditioner she uses now and then, and actually owns a frilly skirt, and looks in the mirror—ow, ow, ow!”

It couldn’t have been helped this time. It was Kano-san’s own fault.

“By the way, Kisaragi, shouldn’t you contact your agency or family or something? It’s probably best so they don’t take your absence as something serious.”

“Ah!! You’re right! I completely forgot!”

“Before that, Kido, could you let me go first.....?! I give, I give!”

Without changing her expression at all, Kido-san tightened her grip on Kano-san’s arm.

In any case, I had better call my manager..... No, that was too scary. It might be easier to just send a text.....

When I took out my phone, I saw that a tremendous amount of missed calls, texts, and voicemails had piled up.

My stomach was starting to hurt.

How was I supposed to explain this situation? In the first place, this sort of bizarre situation didn’t crop up very often at all.

For the time being, I tried to just write down whatever came to mind.

Subject: Quitting my job

Body: Right now, I’m at the hideout of a group of people called the Mekameka-dan. I want them to help cure me of my condition. Please don’t worry about me. Please tell my family not to worry, either. I’m really sorry——

——Having written this much, I let out the biggest sigh that I’d sighed that entire day.

They’d probably think the sender of this text had eaten some kind of weird mushroom.

Just from the wording, it obviously wasn’t the kind of text that an ordinary person would write.

“I..... How am I supposed to explain to them? About this situation.....”

“.....Uh, well..... How should I put this..... Sorry that you have to go through this.....”

I looked to Kido-san for help, but she must have been feeling guilty for bringing me here by mistake because she seemed too flustered to be able to say anything else.

“Uuu... Well, anyway, there’s no way I can send this text..... Isn’t there some better way of wording it.....?”

“T-Tea’s ready. Sorry to keep you wait—.....! Uwahhh!”

As I stared at my phone, trying to think of how to rewrite the text, tea came raining down on me from the right.

A considerable amount of liquid splashed onto my head and my phone.

“Uwaaaaaaaahhh!”

For the umpteenth time today, my screams echoed across the room.

It was partly because I’d just had hot tea spilled on me, but another reason was because of the words “Now Sending” displayed on the screen of my phone.

“Ahhh! Wahhh?! I-I-I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!”

“I-It’s fine, just hurry up and bring a rag over!”

Marie-san tried apologizing after she’d tripped, but Kido-san just pointed frantically towards the kitchen.

I frantically tapped the “Cancel” button, but there was no response.

Unable to stop it, the text finished sending, and immediately after, as if it had completed its final task, my phone quietly passed away. How could this have happened.....?

“I-I brought a rag——Uwah!”

This time, I was hit in the head with a soaking wet rag that hadn’t been wrung out at all.

The cold liquid ran down my hair, coming down in droplets,

Without bothering to take off the rag sitting on my head, I looked around at everyone.

There was Marie-san, pale-faced and on the verge of tears,

Kano-san, who was still snickering despite the situation,

and Kido-san, who was looking helpless and covering her face with the hood of her parka.

——Ahh..... What a mess. Yet somehow, none of that really mattered.

I was having so much fun, I didn’t really care about anything else anymore.

I hadn’t felt like this in a long time.

It might’ve just been a misunderstanding on my part,

But at that time, I thought to myself, “This must be what it means to be young.”

Like goofing around with your club members after school—is this what it feels like?

Outside, the sun was probably still shining unbearably brightly,

and the cicadas crying out in their shrill voices.

On such a summer day, I made a decision.

And as if to confirm that decision, I tried putting it into words.

“——I’ll do my best in the Mekakushi-dan!”

Kagerou Days III

I wonder when the beginning was.

The original beginning.

For the sake of the summer course, we were supposed to go to Hiyori's relative's house from the countryside.

If I remember correctly, that was what we were supposed to do.

I wonder what the name of that white-haired person who was at the house was.

I feel like it was an awfully weird name.

Well, I can't really talk about other people either though. A name like hibiya is most likely a moderately weird name as well.

That tall person who did things at his own pace.

Maybe I should ask Hiyori. Most likely, she probably remembers it.

It's just, I feel as if I've asked this many times in the past.

I wonder what kind of name it was..... well, whatever.

Now that I think about it, I wonder where Hiyori went.

I'm sure that we left the house together.

Has there ever been a time where we've been alone like this?

I feel like there has, but at the same time don't.

Huh..... It's even started to rain.

This is probably the first time, I think.....

Inside of the dream that keeps repeating over and over,
the rain that the forecast didn't predict changes the city's scenery.

The voices of the cicada's that were crying so much,
and the standing heat haze as well, was completely hidden by the shadows today.

"Hey..... you."

"What is it?"

"Did you come here by yourself?"

"No..... I came with a friend, but we got separated"

"Friend?"

"Yes. We're always together. But for some reason I feel like we won't be able to see each other

today.....”

“I see. Do you want to see ‘her’?”

“..... I do.”

“I see. Then it’ll definitely be fine. You, and her as well, will definitely.....”

“..... Where are you going?”

“I don’t mind if you follow me, but are you sure you won’t regret it?”

“Yes.”

“Then come with me. People like you, people who will help, will definitely be waiting.”

“Help.....?”

“Because there is definitely something that their ‘eyes’ and your ‘eyes’ can see.....”

“——That’s why, don’t ever forget what happened today.”

Mekakushi Chord

Water trickled down slowly, following the curves of my body. I was finally able to take the shower that I’d been wanting to take since that morning, but I never would have imagined it quite like that.

Taking a shower in the hideout of a mysterious organization, after having both my cell phone and myself drenched in tea, and been apologized to profusely.

It sounded even more suspicious when put into words, but it was true how this situation was even stranger than the script for any TV drama.

Finishing my shower, I went back out to the room while drying my hair. The other three glanced up at me briefly when I entered, but went back to their previous activities soon after.

The pendulum of the old-fashioned clock on the wall swung.

It was just past 11:30 AM.

“I feel kind of bad, since you even lent me a change of clothes.....”

“No, don’t worry about it. To begin with, it was the fault of one of ours, anyway. Honestly, what a mess....”

“Yeah, you’re right.... Haaah—ah! No, it’s okay! Really, it is! It’s no big deal!”

Although Marie-chan had been apologizing again and again since a while ago, her eyes would start watering every time I sighed, like she was about to cry.

“But.... But.....!”

In Marie-chan’s hand was a sealed bag stuffed with drying agents, and inside of the bag was my cell phone, which had been drenched in tea earlier.

On top of the cleanly-wiped table was a mountain of snacks, piled up like appetizers, that she’d opened just to get all of the drying agents.

“I.... I have to pay her back for it.....”

“You say that, but where’re you gonna get the money from, huh? Are you gonna sell all your books?”

Kido-san, who sat lazily on the sofa while reading a magazine, said this sharply, and Marie-chan finally began to cry.

“Waaah!! Hey—h-hold on a minute, Leader!!”

“I’m just saying the truth. She really doesn’t have any money to pay with.”

“St-still..... M-Marie-chan, don’t worry about it, okay? Come on, don’t cry~”

Although I tried comforting her, she continued to sniffle and cry while clutching the bag.

“But, you know, that’s not the real problem here. Won’t it be bad if you don’t stay in touch with someone on the outside soon? Even if you don’t explain every detail, you’ve gotta tell them something, right?”

Kano-san forced a shrug and said this with his usual smile.

“Hmm... Well, yeah, you do have a point~.....”

It was true that the text I’d sent earlier was worded pretty badly.

I had a feeling that this was going to turn into a big deal soon. In fact, things like, “The sudden disappearance of an ultra-popular idol!? Could it have been a kidnapping!?” were already starting to make their way all over the afternoon talk shows.

“Even if you don’t remember your manager’s cell phone number, you at least remember your home phone, right?”

Speaking of which, Kano-san had looked up the number of my agency and tried calling for me earlier, but it seemed like he’d been put on hold the entire time, with little likelihood of actually connecting to anyone.

“.....W-well, about that.....”

“Eh.....? Kisaragi-chan, don’t tell me you....”

“N-no, it’s just... I’m just bad with numbers, or well.....! B-but I remember if add all the numbers together, they add up to fifty!”

“What’s with that useless piece of information...”

“Uuu~....”

Since this morning, I felt like someone out there must be feeling very sorry for my stupidity.

“Ahh, at this rate, the police might get involved, and our location will be given away~....”

“If that happens, we’ll probably all be arrested on charges of kidnapping..... If we could just do something about the cell phone....”

Kido-san sighed and looked at Marie-chan, making her shiver and begin to cry even harder.

Although I thought the situation right now was pretty serious, for some reason, Kido-san and Kano-san seemed to be having fun, mainly with teasing Marie.

“I know! Marie should just find a job with daily pay and earn enough money to pay for a replacement phone!”

Kano-san grinned, and said this as he brought his fist down onto the palm of his other hand.

“Good idea. Let’s see here..... Oh, look, there’re hiring people to do traffic control. No experience needed, either.”

Kido-san threw down the job opportunities magazine she was reading onto the table. The page it was opened to had an illustration of a character wearing a yellow helmet and waving around a red, fluorescent traffic baton.

When Marie-chan saw that, she stopped crying, her face gradually becoming pale.

“No, no, this one’s much better. ‘Manual labor, everyone’s happy! Penguin Brand Ishifuro Transport!’ Well.... The wages are kinda low, but they welcome both guys and girls!”

“Well, I guess it’s good enough since they give on-job training..... H-hey, hold just on a minute.”

Marie-chan had put down the bag she’d been clutching onto the table and stood up quietly to walk away, but Kido-san grabbed her by the back of her collar and pulled her back down to sit.

“Where d’you think you’re going?”

Kido-san asked her, but by the look on Marie-chan’s face, she didn’t seem so concerned about the cell phone or anything anymore, but rather, full of fear for the dangers her body might have to face.

“I..... I can’t... do this sort of....”

In the job opportunities magazine laid open on the table was a cute illustration of a pink penguin. It looked like the mascot character of the freight company, but contrary to its cute appearance, the caption, “No experienced needed. Open to both males and females. Seeking applicants that are physically fit and enjoy manual labor!” labeled it as a very sweaty job offer.

“W-wait, hold on, wouldn’t this type of job be a little too hard for Marie-chan.....?”

“I think it’d be great experience for being in the working society! Woah, the working hours are from 6 AM to 11 PM! And you can start working on the first day, too! With a job like this, won’t you be able to earn enough money for the phone in no time at all?”

Rather than smiling now, Kano-san was instead looking at Marie-chan with more of a malicious grin.

And each time, Marie-chan shivered and let out small wails.

I wondered what merits they saw in picking on her so much.

“Stop it! This is just too mean! Can’t you see that Marie-chan doesn’t want to!?”

I snatched the magazine up from the table, and Marie-chan stared at me as if I were some kind of goddess.

“Yeah, but we were thinking it’d be better sooner than later for her to learn about how tough society can be. She can’t stay as a NEET forever.”

Kano-san said this as he stretched out on the sofa as well, and Kido-san nodded in agreement.

Did that mean that these two already had some kind of job?

“B-but I *am* working already....!”

For once, Marie-chan was actually speaking up for herself.

However, Kido-san and Kano-san spoke over her again, as if to drown out her words.

“You mean that side job of making fake flowers? How much do you earn from that again? About 500 yen a month?”

“F-five hundred yen!?”

I wasn’t able to hide my shock at hearing the monthly earnings was only a three-digit figure, and wound up repeating it loudly in disbelief.

Seeing my reaction, Marie-chan’s face turned red with shame.

“Well, yes.... B-but I spend a lot of time and effort making each one.....”

“You know... You only make five yen for each one, right? And since you only finish about three to four each day....”

Kido-san said with a sigh.

Following up, Kano-san continued by saying,

“Normal people would probably work at least a hundred times as fast. Don’t you think so, Kisaragi-chan?”

“Ehh!? Me!?”

Marie-chan was staring intensely at me, as if pleading for help. But, as expected, there wasn’t much I could say to support making only 500 yen in an entire month.

“Umm, well..... Y-you know! I’m sure that everyone has their own pace for doing things! So I think Marie-chan’s doing a great job, too....!”

“.... Even if she only earns one coin a month?”

“E-even if it’s only one coin....!”

After I answered Kido-san’s question without faltering, I slowly checked to see Marie-chan’s reaction. She was looking over at me with a very satisfied expression.

While I still had some uncertainties, that put me at ease. Still, I couldn’t help but worry about this girl’s future.

“Hmm... Well, if that’s what you think, then. I suppose Kisaragi-chan doesn’t expect Marie to pay her back for the phone?”

Kano-san asked Kido-san for confirmation, and she nodded without another word.

“Then, it’s settled! Isn’t this great, Marie? Kisaragi-chan said that she’s paying it entirely by herself!”

“Ehh!? Wait, but that’s.... Ehhh!?”

I was thoroughly confused by this sudden turn of events.

“Eh? So you’re going to make Marie pay, after all?”

Kano-san asked with a smile that was much too relaxed.

“....nn! N-no... I’ll.... pay for it myself....”

“Hear that? Good for you, Marie!”

“Well, that takes care of that.”

I’d intended to pay for it myself to begin with, but now it felt like I’d been ensnared in some kind of trap. Were these people always like this.....?

They truly were a suspicious group.

“Umm... I-is it really okay....?”

Marie-chan was staring at me with concern.

“Ah! Y-yeah! It’s totally fine!”

In reality, all of my earnings from “work” were always being managed, so while the only money I was free to spend was my allowance, just this month’s portion probably wouldn’t be enough.

However, the one good thing was that I didn’t have any friends to go out with, so I had more than enough money saved up. If I just took some out from there, then—

“It looks like it’d be a little tough with only this much.... Is it really okay, Kisaragi-chan?”

“I’ll manage somehow.... —Wait!! Why do you have my wallet!? Eh? Wh-when did you...?!”

The thing that Kano-san was looking through calmly was indeed my wallet, which I was sure I’d put away in my bag. When I checked in my bag, it really was gone. When had he taken it...?

“Woah! Kisaragi-chan, throw away your receipts~! Anyway, don’t you eat dried mangoes a little too much?”

“You buy this everyday... in a set with dried squid. Are you working out your teeth?”

Kano-san took the receipts out of my wallet and laid them on top of the desk, and together with Kido-san, began looking through them.

“Right? Woah, what’s with this drink! Red bean soup with... added soda? You’ve been buying it every day since this day. Are you hooked on it?”

Marie-chan looked at the receipt from the sidelines and giggled. My face became so red it felt like it was spouting flames.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

I raked up all the receipts from the top of the table at an incredible speed and snatched my wallet back from Kano-san.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?! Looking through people’s wallets without permission.....!”

“Eh? Oh, well.... For some reason or other?”

For that some reason or other, the situation of my eating habits was being exposed?

If I had known this would happen, I wished I’d just bought nothing but a clubhouse sandwich and tea every day.

“Are you a dried squid and red bean soup idol?”

“Wh-what about it.....?! Is that a bad thing?!”

While looking at a receipt she’d picked up, Kido-san muttered with a pitying face, and Kano-san’s expression also instantly became serious.

“As I thought... you really have it rough, huh? Sorry for just prying without permission.”

“L-let’s just stop!! Aaaaaah!! I-I’ve never seen a snack like this before! The wrapping is nice, and it looks delicious....”

To change the unbearable topic, I picked up a wrapped snack from the desk that Marie-chan had left unopened earlier.

It was a daikon radish delicacy, labeled, “Special Concentrated Kelp Broth, the snack of real men!”

“S-sure.... You can go ahead and eat it if you want...”

Kido-san said this as if perplexed, and Kano-san looked like he was trying not to laugh. I wanted to be crawl into a hole, be buried, and burrow deep underground.

“B-but red bean soup is good.... I like it, too....”

“M-Marie-chan.....!”

Marie-chan sounded like she was trying to defend me.

This girl was so nice.....!

“But there’s soda in it.”

“Oh, I guess that’s pretty gross then.....”

Ultimately, being too honest backfired.

My mood plunged all the way down to the depths.

“I don’t care anymore.... I’m just a weirdo, either way.... That’s why I can’t make any friends.”

Most likely, a receipt for the purchase of dried squid wouldn’t come out of a normal high schoolgirl’s wallet.

“O-oi, don’t get depressed! Cheer up....”

“Special Concentrated Kelp Broth..... My stomach hurts.... Hee....”

“How long are you going to keep laughing?! Just—aaah....! We’re sorry, okay?”

As if terrified of Kano-san, who was holding his stomach in laughter,

Marie-chan’s shoulders trembled, and she made a scared face.

“Sorry, sorry. Ahh, I thought I was gonna die. Well, let’s cut the chatting here. Should we go out soon?”

“Eh? We’re going out?Where to?”

Kano-san stood up and stretched.

“Well, we’ve gotta go get you a new phone, right? Wasn’t there a cell phone store around here?”

“Yeah, I remember seeing one.”

Kido-san said slowly as she flipped through the digital electronics magazine that she’d picked up from the rack beside the sofa.

“Um, sorry to ask but, is there really any point to getting a new phone now.....?”

“Hm~ Well, there is if they can transfer over the phone contacts or something. Anyway, we’ll ask about it.”

“U-um, but.... If I go outside....”

Wouldn’t it be a very bad idea for me to go out now?

If I attracted another huge crowd again, I doubted that I’d be able to get away a second time.

“Ahh, we’ll be tagging along too, so it’ll be fine. Right, Kido?”

“.... Yeah, no problem.”

As I stood there, stunned, with no idea what was going on, Kano-san grinned at me cheerfully.

“About what you saw of Kido’s ‘ability’ earlier, that was actually just one element of it.”

Kano-san spread out his arms and continued,

“Putting it simply, as well as controlling her *own* presence, she can also simultaneously control the presence of *anything* else around her. We call it the ‘eye concealing’ ability. In other words—”

“D-does that mean I’ll become invisible too!?”

Caught up in my curiosity, I shouted before I could stop myself.

“It’s not that you become invisible, but your presence becomes masked, and much less noticeable. You’ve experienced it too, haven’t you, Kisaragi-chan? Rather than gathering attention to yourself,

you gather attention to *something else*—”

I did recall several instances like that. Just like with the picture I'd drawn during class in elementary school.

“In other words, it means that your ‘eye captivating’ ability can be used externally, as well. Well, whether or not you were conscious of it, I’m sure you’ve probably unintentionally gathered attention to things before. In any case, Kido’s ability is capable of completely nullifying yours, so not to worry. Although it was Kido’s misunderstanding to begin with, I’m sure that you were meant to come here, no mistake.”

Kido-san hid her face behind the magazine in embarrassment.

“What’d she misunderstand? Hey, what’s that all about?”

Marie-chan asked Kano-san this with a confused expression, and he smiled darkly again.

It seemed that this person genuinely enjoyed looking down on others.

“It’s true, really. Even though Kido was teasing you about it earlier, she actually—”

“A-alright, let’s get going! Marie, don’t let it get to you. It’s nothing.”

Kido-san tossed the magazine off to the side and jumped up from her seat quickly.

“We’re going out.....?”

“J-just to the cell phone shop,”

As soon as Marie-chan directed this question at him, Kano-san replied in a choked tone.

Was it because Kido-san was glaring at him from the side and hissing, “Don’t say it”?

In that moment, I saw the glimpse of the hierarchical order in this group.

“.... Are we going to pass by the park?”

“Hm? Yeah, probably. Why?”

“Then, I’ll come along, too. Because... I want to give it a proper burial....”

As Kano-san stood there dumbfounded, Marie-chan headed for the kitchen.

Unable to follow the conversation, Kido-san and I were just as clueless.

“... Burial....? Did Marie-chan’s pet pass away, or....?”

“I don’t think so. In the first place, she doesn’t even own a pet.”

“Yeah. Marie wouldn’t be able to afford to buy the pet food, anyway, and I don’t think she was keeping one in secret....”

“Then, what did she mean....?”

As we quietly discussed what Marie-chan could have meant by giving a “burial,” we heard the clinking sound of something glass-like from the kitchen.

Marie-chan was putting the fragments of the cup, the one that had shattered earlier, into a cloth pouch.

“Ah...”

I then remembered how Marie-chan had wanted to use her favorite cup. Even though she’d gone to all the trouble of bringing it out, she had tripped and ended up breaking it.

As Marie-chan picked up the fragments of the cup with pictures of animals printed on it, she was making a face like she might cry again.

“Ahh... So that's what she meant by wanting to bury it....”

“Marie really treasured that cup...”

Slowly, one by one, she moved each fragment from the plastic bag and into the cloth pouch with the pretty patterns.

Rather than moving the pieces into the pouch like it was a chore, she seemed like she was taking her time by counting each of the memories associated with the cup.

“.... Leader, could I speak to you for a minute?”

“Hm? What is it?”

“About the cell phone store, is it okay even if it's not one that's nearby? For instance, how about a department store that has a cell phone corner...?”

Kido-san seemed confused for a moment, but after figuring out what I had in mind, she started speaking,

“If we're going out, it doesn't really matter where we end up going. Choose wherever you'd like.”

“Th-thank you!”

Kano-san also smiled, this time with true sincerity.

“Sounds good to me. Marie's never been to a department store before, so I'm sure she'll be happy. Not to mention, it's completely safe as long as Kido's here, right?”

“Well, it's up to her. Why don't you go and invite her?”

Kido-san urged me on with a pat on my back, and I went into the kitchen.

When I neared, I saw that Marie-chan was more or less finished with moving the big fragments, but seemed to be debating about what to do with the smaller shards.

Clearly, it would be dangerous to pick up those tiny shards with your bare hands.

“Marie-chan, do you need any help?”

When I stood next to her and called out, Marie-chan turned towards me in surprise.

“Eh....?”

“It's dangerous if you touch the little shards, right? I'll hold the pouch, so you pour them in, okay?”

“O-okay....”

Saying this, Marie-chan handed me the cloth pouch with the pretty patterns on it.

Judging by the weight of all the glass inside, it seemed to hold fragments for four cups.

Did she plan to bury the other broken cups together with her favorite one?

As I held the mouth of the pouch open wide, Marie-chan poured in the remaining fragments from the plastic bag.

“That cup was really important to you, huh?”

“Mm-hm.... Mother gave it to me.”

I felt my heart clench. With how worried Kano-san and Kido-san had seemed about Marie-chan’s future, I got the feeling that her parents weren’t around.

Whether their absence was temporary, or permanent—at the very least, it didn’t seem like her parents were living anywhere nearby right now.

—I didn’t want to, but it was at that moment that I recalled a memory I could never forget, making my chest tighten.

“I see....”

“But it’s okay. Because I’ll always keep it in my memories....”

I was worried that Marie-chan might start crying again, but when I looked over, she had a very gentle smile on her face.

Seeing her like that, I was the one that started to get teary-eyed.

But since Marie-chan didn’t cry, I couldn’t let her see me looking so sad, either.

“I see.... Hey, if you’d like, do you want to go shopping with us afterwards?”

I boldly suggested the idea that I’d come up with earlier.

“Shopping.....? For a phone.....?”

“Well, only if you’d like to, but.... How about we go buy matching cups with everyone, too?”

The moment I said this, Marie-chan looked at me in surprise.

“M-matching!? I get to help choose, too....?”

“Of course! It’d be fun to have tea together with matching cups, don’t you think so?”

Marie-chan’s expression brightened, seemingly in favor of this idea.

“....I want to....!”

“Really!? That’s great.... Alright, let’s head out, then!”

“Okay.....! But, where are we going....?”

“We’re going to go to the department store today! It’s a place that has a whole bunch of different shops! I promise you it’ll be a ton of fun!”

“Department store....!?”

Marie-chan’s face shone with expectation as she tried imagining what it’d be like.

I didn’t think that she’d be this happy to go shopping with us....!

I’d thought that today had been my unlucky day, but it looked like it was starting to turn into a fun one, instead.

Shopping at the department store, huh.... My heart was starting to beat faster in anticipation, too.

“I-I’m going to go get ready....!”

She carefully put the cloth pouch down in the kitchen, and tottered off towards her room.

Seeing her walk with such airy, springy steps made me feel genuinely happy, too, and I couldn’t help smiling.

Ahh, but it looked unsafe.... She might trip and fall again.....

“Oh? Did Kisaragi-chan invite you to come along?”

“M-mm-hm... I’m going to go get ready now!”

Marie-chan answered Kano-san’s question, sounding like she was really looking forward to going out.

—That was, until Kano-san said something unnecessary.

“That’s great! Ah, you’ll be going out with *those* socks, right!?He...he.....!”

As if suddenly remembering something funny, Kano-san started to laugh.

Socks.....?

Did he mean the ones from before, when they were talking about some funny socks that Marie-chan had been wearing?

Although, Marie-chan looked barefoot right now.....

As I thought this, Kano-san’s chuckling suddenly stopped unnaturally.

Or rather, he had stopped moving completely, as if time had stopped for him alone.

Kido-san was making a troubled expression.

“K-Kano-san.....? What’s wro—.....”

I start to walk forward a bit, but then I noticed something off about Marie-chan.

There was something completely different than before; her head was tilted down slightly, and she was emitting a menacing air.

Both ends of her long hair that hung at her shoulders swayed, wriggling as if they had life of their own. And through the gaps of her hair, her “eyes” were clearly different from their usual, pale pink shade..... They were now a bright red color.

“Uwaaaah!!”

Before I could stop myself, I screamed, shocked by this sudden change.

The girl who had been so docile up until that point was now giving off a menacing aura, with her hair wriggling threateningly and all.

“Haaah~.... What an idiot....”

Kido-san knocked on Kano-san’s head, but he remained standing with no reaction whatsoever.

His expression remained unchanged, just like a mannequin.

“Wh-what’s happened to him.....?”

“Ahh... Marie’s ‘eye contact’ ability is capable of turning people into stone.”

“St-stone!?”

Kido-san explained while knocking on Kano-san’s head again, but with the suddenness of it all, I couldn’t very well understand what she was saying.

Being able to turn people into stone was entirely different from my own condition of “captivating” peoples’ eyes.

It sounded almost like magic.

The entire time, Marie-chan continued to glare at Kano-san while breathing out slowly.

“But how is that.... Wait, is Kano-san going to be alright!?”

I knew it was wrong of me to say, but the way that Kano-san’s face was stuck like he couldn’t stop laughing *did* look very funny.

“No, it’s already too late at this point..... He’s never going to return to normal.”

“.....Eh?”

“How unfortunate..... Alright, then! Guess we’ll just keep him in the room to use as a coat hanger! Although to be honest, I don’t really want to....”

Kido-san said without a single change of expression.

Kano-san.... Even though we’d only just met, to have to say goodbye in such a way.....

Ahh, but really, I wouldn’t want to use a coat hanger like that either....

“Anyway, he’s taking up space like this, so let’s throw him out with the rest of the trash..... Alright... Marie, help grab the other end.”

“Yes.... Let’s throw him out.....”

“——Uwahh!? What’re you doing, Kido? Suddenly hugging me from behind like tha—ugh!!”

Just as soon as the two were about to move him, Kano-san suddenly started moving again.

Kido-san immediately kneed him in the ribs.

I’d thought that he might come back due to the cruelty of Kido-san’s works, but it seemed like this physical wound would be more fatal. Kano-san crumpled to the floor, groaning.

“Are you an idiot!? We were just about to go out, so don’t go stirring up trouble!”

“Leader, I’m sorryyy~.....”

Kano-san replied while collapsed on the floor, but even then, he still had a smile on his face.

“Come on, Marie, you go get ready, too. If we don’t hurry, all the shops are going to close.”

“Eh!? Wah.... I’ll go get ready right now.....!”

Marie-chan ran off to her room, while Kido-san’s shoulders slumped in exasperation.

“Um.... What is Marie-chan.... exactly?”

“We’re not too sure ourselves, but..... Apparently, she’s a descendant of Medusae.”

“M-Medusae!? Wait.... You mean..... the ones that can actually turn people into stone!?”

“Yeah. I didn’t really believe it much at first either, but it’s clear that she isn’t human.”

Since earlier, I was hearing nothing but unbelievable things, and couldn’t help but feel dumbfounded.

I’d heard about Medusa, at the very least.

Although to be clear, I only had the common knowledge that most people had about her—a legendary monster that could turn people to stone and had snakes growing from her head.

And just now, I had seen that power being used, right before my very eyes.

“I heard that she was raised her entire life while conscious of being a Medusa; her parents reminded her of that constantly. Although, while Marie’s mother apparently had the power to really

turn people into stone, Marie can only stop their movement.”

“B-but.... That sounds so unreal.....”

“I get where you’re coming from, but the fact of the matter is that Marie really is real. And anyway, she’s just like you and I. Whether or not it makes any sense, we have these strange powers. You get that, right?”

“Th-that’s true, but....”

“—Will you come to hate her?”

“.....Eh?”

“Knowing that she isn’t human now, will you come to hate her?”

“...Of course not.... I want to be friends with her.....!”

“....If that’s the case, then let’s just leave it at that. In the future, I’ll make sure to tell you all about us. And if you’re willing, you can tell us about yourself, too.”

“O-okay.....!”

“I-I’m ready now.....”

Marie-chan peeked out from behind the door of the room she’d entered. However, she seemed too embarrassed about something to come out.

“What’re you hanging back for? If you’re ready, then let’s go.”

“O-okay.....”

When Marie-chan opened the door and walked out, there wasn’t anything particularly weird with how she looked.

The socks that Kano-san had made fun of were plain and ordinary white socks.

“Huh? Is there something wrong with those socks?”

“Ahh, those are normal ones. The ones she wore before were loose socks.”

“L-loose socks.....!?”

As I tried imagining what she’d look like wearing loose socks with the outfit she had on right now, it really would look....unique.

Marie-chan’s face turned beet red, and she drew closer to Kido-san.

“Wh-why’d you tell her!? I’m already wearing normal ones this time.....!”

“Hm? Sorry, she asked, so I answered. Nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“B-but.....!”

Marie-chan glanced at me nervously. She must have been hurt after being made fun of for them.

But, why had she chosen to wear loose socks.....?

“It’s not my fault....! They were in Kano’s book....!”

“Kano-san’s.... You mean this?”

I picked up the magazine Kano-san had been reading earlier, and together with the heading, “Special feature! Collection of SUPER Nostalgic Gyaru Fashions” there were a bunch of female models lined up, wearing... some really interesting clothes.

“....Th-they looked nice, so I just.....”

The Medusae of this generation really had interesting taste in fashion.

“And I even did my best to knit them....”
And what’s more, they had been handmade.

*

Leaving the side streets and reaching the main streets, there was the city’s usual hustle and bustle.

I could see the restaurant across the street crowded with whole families of customers.

I never thought I’d be coming back here after attracting such a huge crowd, but compared to before, it was completely different now.

Even though I wasn’t even wearing a disguise or trying to hide myself, no crowds formed, and no one tried to greet me. The people that passed by didn’t even glance in my direction, and simply walked by while looking straight ahead of them.

“Th-this is.... actually kind of refreshing....”

“No point in telling me that, since I can’t exactly relate. Anyway, how long is it going to take for Kano to notice us?”

Kano-san, who had walked ahead on the sidewalk, was looking in our direction.

He was staring in concentration, as if looking for something small. He then perked up suddenly, and seeming satisfied, came back to join us.

“Yep, it’s working perfectly! Actually, I had to try really hard before I finally found you guys!”

“Took you long enough,”

Kido-san sighed as if she’d gotten fed up with waiting.

“Well that’s not my fault. I really couldn’t see you,”

Kano-san complained without dropping his smile.

“Wow~..... So we really can’t be seen, huh....”

“Hmm, how should I put this... People can see us, but they don’t notice us. Experiencing it from both ends again, this really is kinda creepy.”

According to what Kido-san had said earlier, it seemed that her ability let her erase the presence of anything without a two-meter radius.

However, since it wasn’t like we became invisible or anything, things didn’t seem any different from our side.

“Wow.....! I wanna see what it looks like, too.....!”

“Are you stupid or something? If you get too far away, that destroys the point entirely.....On the other hand, Marie! You’re too close! You’re suffocating me!”

Kido-san pulled away from Marie-chan, who was clinging to her hoodie desperately.

“Th-there are too many peopleeee.....”

“We’re in the middle of the city, so of course there are. In any case, there aren’t any problems, so let’s continue the mission.”

“R-right!”

Hearing the word “mission,” it really felt like we were doing some kind of secret infiltration and I couldn’t help but start to feel kind of excited.

Well, in reality, it was just a very ordinary mission of replacing my phone and buying new cups.

Walking ahead of Kido-san and Kano-san, when we finally reached the main street, it was like entering a completely different world.

The scenery all around me was constantly moving, even without our interference, almost like in a movie.

The people passing by didn't pay us any attention either, and if we weren't careful, it seemed like they might bump into us. It really felt like we'd turned invisible, and that sensation brought me a relief that I'd never once felt up until that point.

However, with so much traffic in the street immediately to my right, I started to feel a bit scared. Worried, I looked over at Marie-chan, and saw that her face had turned very pale. I hadn't noticed it until now, but I could hear her persuading herself in a small voice by saying, "It's okay..... It's okay....." repeatedly.

"Um.... Kano-san....."

"Eh? What is it? Wait, why are you whispering?"

"Ah..... W-well, I don't really know why....."

"You can just talk in a normal voice, y'know? You could even sing, if you wanted to. Like, you could sing your debut single—what was it again? Pink-something....."

"Uwaaaaaaaaahhh!! Why're you bringing that up all of a sudden!? I could punch you, you know!?"

"You're gonna punch me!?Anyway, see? You shouted so loudly and no one even reacted, right?"

"Oh, you're right..... Wait, that's not the point! What I wanted to say is that Marie-chan doesn't look so well....."

As usual, Marie-chan was mumbling something like a chant under her breath.

If she were to be seen like this in public, most likely, no one would want to get anywhere near her.

"Ah~..... Well, I figured something like this would happened. Hey, Marie? Heeeeey. Huh, this isn't working at all."

Kano-san began walking backwards, and waved his hand in front of Marie-chan's face. However, she seemed to be staring off at something far away, and showed no reaction whatsoever.

Anyway, was it safe to be walking backwards like that in a time like this?

Since no one could see us, we were the ones that had to be careful not to run into anyone.

"Ah, hold on a minute."

Just as I was worrying about those things, Kano-san suddenly stopped.

Kido-san also stopped at the same time, and Marie-chan bumped straight into her from behind.

"Eh.....?"

Right as I was about to ask what was wrong, a kid riding a bicycle came from the left and rode by right in front of us. If we'd kept going without stopping when we did, they would have crashed right into us.

And moreover, they had come from a blind spot that even the rest of us, who had been walking facing forward, wouldn't have seen.

“.....gh! Marie, watch where you’re going!”

“Eek.... I-I’m sorry....”

When Kido-san turned around, Marie-chan bowed her head in apology.

“Jeez, pay a little more attention.....”

“But it’s scary.....! There’s so many people.....!”

“And that’s exactly why I’m telling you to be more careful. Are you some kind of idiot?”

“I-I’m not an idiot.....!”

Marie-chan tried to retort, but it came out as a weak mumble.

“Haah.... Whatever. Let’s just keep going.”

Kido-san started walking again, and so did everyone else.

Marie-chan seemed calmer than before, but she was now mumbling complaints about Kido-san—things like, “Why would she say something like that.....”

Kano-san also continued walking as if nothing had happened.

“Kano-san, how did you know that was going to happen?”

“Eh? Oh, that. Hm~ I just did, I guess?”

“You just did....? ...Are you able to tell the future, too.....?”

At this point, I probably wouldn’t be surprised if he replied something like, “Yeah, why?” but instead, he joked around by saying, “The future, huh~? I sure wish I could! Maybe then I could tell what tomorrow’s fortune is going to be or something!”

As we proceeded down the main streets and got closer to the department store, the traffic steadily increased.

There seemed to be a lot of cars going from the department store. In one of the cars turning to the opposite street, I caught sight of a giant stuffed animal loaded inside.

“Hn. Hey, we’re going to cross this street. Don’t wander off too far from me.”

Kido-san stopped in front of the traffic light and pointed to the sidewalk across the street.

There were cars making right-hand turns there, so we had to be careful when crossing.

“C-crossing the street really is kind of scary since the drivers can’t see us.....”

“Hm. It’ll be perfectly fine. Just follow right behind Kido.”

“That said, you’re following a bit *too* close. Give me.... a little.... more space.....”

“But....! But.....!”

Marie-chan had latched on so tightly to Kido-san from behind, she looked like she was about to perform a German suplex on her.

Kido-san was desperately trying to break free from her, hanging onto her own hoodie.

I also instinctively walked closer to Kido-san.

As I watched a truck drive by right in front of us, it sent a chill down my spine.

“Okay... I’m ready.”

“Alright. Then let’s go. Stick close.”

After the light turned green, and two cars had turned right, Kano-san started walking across.

Following close behind, Kido-san started to walk, too.

I kept checking the streets out of worry, but since there was a huge crowd crossing the street in the first place, I quickly shifted my attention to avoiding crashing into any people, instead.

After we safely crossed to the opposite sidewalk, we could see the department store through the gaps between the buildings in front of us.

Once we crossed the next street, turned to the left, and then kept going further down for a bit, we would reach our destination.

I’d passed by the department store on numerous occasions before, but it always just looked so huge.

‘Like something from an RPG,’ was what I always thought.

“Y’know, that department store~ It looks like something you’d see in an RPG, don’t you think?”

As we were waiting at the traffic light to cross the next street, Kano-san suddenly said this to me.

“Eh!? Ehhh!? Why makes you say that!?”

“Huh..... Why’re you so surprised? Did I say something strange.....?”

I was so surprised by the timing of what he’d said, I wound up feeling suspicious of him.

I could see that Kano-san seemed really taken aback.

It only seemed to happen from time to time, but I was starting to feel a little scared that he might actually be able to read minds.

“Uh.... N-no, it’s just... ahahah..... No, it’s nothing.”

“Hm~? You’re acting kind of strange. Ah, is it because we were thinking the same thing?”

“Uwah! H-how did you know that.....?”

Could he really read minds, after all?

Then, if that was the case, every thought that’d gone through my mind up until then..... Just imagining it made me shiver.

“Ah, so I was right? It’s just a thought I had, but you and I really think alike, Kisaragi-chan!”

“P-please don’t say that, it gives me the creeps.”

I said my honest opinion, and Kano-san got depressed by it, his shoulders slumping heavily.

It didn’t seem like he was able to read minds, after all.

“Kido~.... In the end, you’re the only one who understand me~”

“Come any closer and I’ll kill you.”

“Yes ma’~m....”

Kano-san tried to approach Kido-san, but he was met only with hostility.

As expected of the leader.

Once the light turned green and we had crossed to the opposite sidewalk again, we were finally almost at the department store.

Earlier, when Kano-san and I had been walking in a single-file line on the side closest to the opposing traffic, I had seen a white van drive by.

Come to think of it, what had become of the TV drama shooting that was supposed to happen today....?

Was my manager angry with me, after all?

The whole agency was probably looking all over for me.

I had to contact them soon, and explain all about my situation and feelings.....

“A-are you okay.....?”

“Eh?”

When I looked to see who was talking to me, I saw Marie-chan staring at me worriedly.

“Ah, yeah! I’m fine! Umm.... Did I really look that down....?”

Marie-chan nodded slightly.

Right—I’d finally started to make some friends.

A friend that worried about me not because I was an idol, but simply because of who I was as a person.

“S-sorry to worry you like that.... Ah, Marie-chan, we can see the department store from here! I bet they have a bunch of fun stuff inside.... I can’t wait!”

“Eh.....? W-wow.... You’re right! It looks just like a castle from a picture book!”

The row of buildings on the right-hand side thinned, and the department store that had been hidden behind them came into sight.

It had such a gorgeous appearance that I could see where Marie-chan was coming from by saying it looked like a castle.

I’d always wanted to try going to the amusement park above the shops, but since I was always alone, I never got the chance to.

However, I had company today, so maybe we would have some time to go check it out a bit.

I felt my heart start beating even faster in excitement.

“Right!? The inside is even *more* amazing, you know?”

“Yeah! I wanna see!”

Marie-chan’s eyes were sparkling like a little kid.

When I glanced over at Kido-san, I saw her smiling a little.

Realizing that my eyes were probably sparkling just like Marie-chan’s, I started to feel a bit embarrassed.

I walked up next to Kido-san and spoke to her in a quiet voice,

“Leader, you should come shopping with us, too.”

“Hm? No, it’s fine. Not like I have anything to buy, anyway.....”

“Aw~ Why not look for new clothes while we’re here? I’ll pick out something cute for you!”

“You will....!? No, you don’t have to.....”

“Don’t be shy now! I might be like this, but I have confidence in my sense for.....”

“No really, just look at your street clothes. They’re way too flashy, and don’t fit my style at all.....

Wait, what’s wrong?”

It was just as we were approaching the entrance to the department store lot.

I hadn't noticed until we'd gotten close enough, but there stood someone I recognized.

No. It couldn't be. How could it be him, in a place like this.....!?

I didn't think he'd contacted anyone, but still, I had to get away from there as quickly as possible.

“——Kisaragi? What's wrong?”

“Big brother.....”

“Hah.....? ‘Big brother?’ Wh—woah!!”

My legs got tangled up as I tried to run away, and I ended up bumping right into Kido-san. Kido-san then lost her balance, and crashed right into my brother.

“.....Ah!!”

Crap. I'd panicked too much, and made the situation even worse.

“W-wah!!”

Marie-chan must have been startled by the sudden commotion as well, and for some reason, fell down even though there was nothing around her.

Kido-san quickly regained her composure and faced my brother.

“Ah..... U-um, I'm sorry! Uhh..... Er... Um....”

Out of my brother's mouth came a truly worthless and pathetic voice.

Furthermore, he bowed his head so suddenly and deeply, it was enough to shock everyone at the scene.

Oh, give me a break..... Together with a sigh came an enormous regret for accidentally blurting out he was my brother.

“....It's fine, really. It was my bad.”

Kido-san said, and come back over to us.

My brother raised his face and looked around in confusion. He then bent over with his hands on his knees and began breathing heavily.

What was with this worthless creature...

Even though he'd only bumped into a girl, he was acting like he'd just run into a huge grizzly bear.

Luckily, he didn't seem to have noticed I was there, but that was probably because Kido-san was only exerting her power on our side.

Or maybe my brother's eyes had just become rotten.

Either way, I couldn't help but cover my face in embarrassment over all of this.

“This is the worst.....”

“H-hey, what exactly is going on here, Kisaragi!? Is that guy your older brother!?”

Even though she'd acted so calm in front of my brother, as soon as Kido-san turned back to us, she started yelling with cold sweat running down her face.

“Uu..... N-no..... Please, don't be like this..... He's not.....”

“No, no, but I heard Kisaragi-chan call him ‘Big brother’ loud and clear earlier,” Kano-san, who had been watching the situation unfazed, took the opportunity to offer his insights.

“Uuu.....! Anyway, Marie-chan, are you okay!? Sorry for scaring you like that.....!”

Marie-chan had already gotten back up to her feet, but the knees of her socks looked a little frayed.

“Wah.....! A-are you hurt!?”

“Ohh, but today was my first time wearing them.....”

Marie-chan looked like she was only worried about her socks.

It didn’t seem like she’d been injured at all, then.

“Thank goodness you’re okay..... Wait a minute, Kano-san, what’re you grinning about!? That’s so creepy!”

“Eh? Oh, no no, it’s nothing.... Don’t mind me.”

Kano-san was totally making a face like he’d stumbled upon a new toy.

It really was so creepy.

“Uwaaaaah!! This is the worst!! Seriously the worst ever!! Why is this happening.....”

“H-hey, so that guy just now was your brother, right? Really?”

“Leader, you’re being so annoying! Please, just cut it out! Ahh, this sucks so much....”

“R-right.....! Sorry.....”

Looking over at my brother, he was talking into his phone by the gate.

He was probably talking to that girl again.

But why was he even here?

Up until then, he hadn’t left the house for almost two years.....

“Anyway, let’s just get going! Right, Marie-chan!?”

“O-okay..... Kisaragi?Are you angry or something?”

“No of course not!! Come on, Leader, let’s go!”

“R-right.....”

While my brother was just standing there, we’d better hurry up and get inside.

Pushing Kido-san towards the gates, I made to head for the department store as quickly as possible.

“Huh? What about me?”

Kano-san walked beside us while pointing to himself, grinning as he peered over at me.

“Kano-san, please just go back and sleep!”

“Eh~..... Then, I suppose I’ll go hang out with your brother before I head back~.....”

“Ahhhhh!! I was kidding!! Please come along with us!!”

“Aw~ Kisaragi-chan, if you wanted me to come along, then you should’ve just said so~”

Suppressing my murderous intent, I headed for the department store in silence.

In any case, the cell phone corner was on the seventh floor where the home appliances department was.

I couldn’t imagine that my brother had any business at a department store, much less one as huge as this one. And even if he did, it probably wasn’t likely that we’d wind up in the same department.

Anyway, as long as we got away from there, things would be fine.

I wanted to hurry up and get inside. It was finally time for our fun shopping day!

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Afternoon sunlight shone over the whole floor from the glass window.

Because of Obon, there seemed to be a lot of parents bringing their children along to go shopping, and small children played in front of a large refrigerator, opening and closing its door.

If I could, I wanted to play around, too. But, reality was truly cruel. Maybe I was being possessed by some evil creature.

“Ki-Kisaragi.....?”

“Hm~? What is it, Marie-chan?”

“Eek..... U-um..... please cheer up.....”

“Come on. I’m totally fine, you know? This is so fun, isn’t it..... Hehehe.....”

“Y-yeah..... You’re right..... I’m sorry.....”

The seventh floor of the department store.

An upbeat in-store BGM was played in here, the home appliances department.

Kano-san yawned loudly, looking awfully sleepy.

Well, of course. He didn’t even know how long he would have to wait.

We headed towards the seventh floor right after going into the department store, but using the elevator or escalator would mean that we’d have a lot of contact with people. I was worried that Kido-san’s ability couldn’t be used, so we decided to use the staircase. Apparently, our presence could be sensed as soon as we were touched, since our bodies themselves didn’t disappear.

But because Marie-chan would run out of breath every time we went up two floors, we took breaks frequently, and lost quite a lot of time.

Just as we finally reached the seventh floor and were about to head to the cell phone section, my brother came out of the elevator.

I thought that today was a good day, but let me correct myself. Just as I thought, today was unmistakably an unlucky day.

How romantic it was that I’d end up in the exact same location as my brother, who had just gone out for the first time in two years.

If the god of romance was here right now, I wanted to beat him up with all my strength.

By the way, when I bought my new cell phone, I got Kido-san to weaken the effect of her ability.

I thought that I would be recognized if she did that, but I didn’t stand out much.

It seemed that I was only recognized as just another guest whose face they can’t remember.

But it seemed that my brother was a different matter.

There was a possibility that my presence would be recognized more easily just because he was a family member whom I’d spent a lot of time with.

I thought that such things wouldn't happen when it came to my thick-headed brother, but just to be sure, we ended up observing the situation until my brother left.

With that said, presently, I was waiting for my brother to get out as he made some suspicious movements in front of a pot shaped like a hand grenade that he probably didn't have any intention to buy.

“Why did it become like this.....”

I mumbled as the four of us stood side-by-side in an aisle where only a few people passed by.

The party of Mekakushi-dan members who had come to get the new cell phone carried out a strategy where they only had to sidestep customers who would occasionally pass by so they wouldn't bump into them, a strategy that fairly simple, but also hellish.

“How should I put this? You... Your condition brings bad luck, doesn't it?”

“Yes..... That's true..... I've been really conscious of it today.....”

“So, in the end, what did your brother come to buy?”

“I have no idea..... Well, it was probably parts for his computer. I wonder why he took the trouble to come out and buy it himself.....”

“Hm~Isn't it because today's Obon, so he can't order it from the internet or something?”

“Aaah.... I feel like that's the reason..... But still, why did we have come at the exact same time.....”

“Well, your brother is somehow similar to you, Kisaragi-chan, so maybe your wavelengths match?”

“.....I'm really going to hit you, you know?”

“Ah, maybe you're not similar. Maybe I was mistaken.”

“Haah..... Marie-chan, I'm sorry..... I'll make up for this properly.....”

“No..... It was my fault to begin with, anyway..... Besides, this is really fun, so it's okay.”

“Uu..... Sheesh! How long is he going to take!? Hurry up and finish shopping and go home already.....”

“He's only been there for about five minutes, right? We can just wait.”

“I just want to hurry and contact my agency, and then go shopping with Marie-chan~.....!”

“Yeah..... I'm looking forward to going shopping. But I'll wait, so it's okay.”

“Uwaah! Oh, Marie-chan, you're so kind!! Let's eat something sweet after this, okay?”

“Yeah.....! Ah, someone's coming again.”

A customer carrying a large backpack came into the aisle so Marie moved from the spot she was standing.

But, I couldn't help but wonder what this customer had come to look for. He didn't appear to be searching for any products at all, and merely lowered his backpack where he was standing, and started checking what was inside it.

“What's up with him? This person's not leaving at all, is he.....?”

When I looked to the side, Kano-san's attitude had clearly changed.

Kido-san seemed to have noticed that and the look in her eyes sharpened.

“Kido, this is bad.”

“Yeah. Kisaragi, Marie, we’re getting out of here.”

“Eh.....? Okay.....?”

Even when we went out to a large, middle aisle with good visibility, Kano and Kido were still tense.

“What should we do? Should we leave for a while?”

“You go bring Kisaragi’s brother to us. Don’t scare him too much.”

“Understood. Take care of those two.”

“Don’t worry, just hurry up.”

Kido-san said so, and Kano-san vanished into the aisle my brother had just walked into.

“W-wait, Leader? What did you mean by, ‘bring my brother’.....? And if we leave this place, my phone.....”

“There was an unusual smell of gunpowder coming from that person’s bag of just now. It’s probably some kind of firearm. I saw a glimpse of a gun barrel, and he seems to have bombs, too.”

“Eh?”

“.....! This isn’t good.....! The guy who passed through the aisle over there is his accomplice, huh..... Hey, we’re getting out of here right after Kano comes back!”

“Wh-what.....? Kido, what’s wrong.....?”

Marie-chan was confused at Kido-san’s sudden change.

More than half of what she was saying didn’t register in my head, either.

Even though I didn’t understand, the atmosphere had instantly become tense, and it scared me.

My head spun but my thought process couldn’t catch up. However, the scene before me shocked me so much that it burnt into my eyes.

“Leader..... Th-..... That!”

“Damn it..... Anyway, for now, just listen to me. I’m afraid that this place has already been.....”

Suddenly, a loud, roaring sound echoed.

With that sound as a signal, screams rose all at once from the whole floor.

“Eek.....!”

Surprised, Marie-chan clung onto me.

Little by little, the screams became louder, filling up the whole floor.

The man who was standing on the aisle we were in took off his coat, revealing an attire unique to the soldier of an army, took a gun from inside his backpack, and ran off.

“Damn it..... Were we too slow.....!? Hey, watch out!!”

As I stood, dumbfounded and overwhelmed by the situation, Kido-san grabbed Marie-chan’s arm and my arm, and pulled us to inner part of the floor.

Caught in the momentum, all three of us fell to the floor and immediately afterwards, the shutters came down on where we had just been standing, completely blocking off the view of the elevators that we'd been able to see up until that point.

“Hey! Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah.....! Marie-chan, are you alright!”

Marie-chan was trembling in Kido-san's arms.

However, at Kido-san's command, we soon went into a small aisle and the three of us took on a crouching position.

“Marie, calm down, it's fine. The other side won't notice us. It's just...”

Screams arose from various places.

Along with it, the footsteps of people running around resounded on the floor.

“This isn't good..... I think they're terrorists. They're experienced, and they've also planned this out carefully. I think they want to keep the people on this floor as hostages.....”

I had goosebumps.

Up until a while ago, my brother had still been on this floor.

Which meant that, right now, he was probably.....

“Big brother.....!!”

“Hey, wait!! Kano's already gone to get him. Even if you go over there not now, you'll only get caught!!”

“But.....!!”

The moment I imagined the worst outcome, tears flowed from my eyes.

Even though my brother was like that, he was still my only brother.

He's a shut-in, a NEET, and insensitive, but he's still my precious family!

I wondered why it'd come to this.

Even though there was finally hope that my condition could be healed.....

Even though it seemed like I would finally be able to make friends.....

Maybe this was the punishment for causing so much trouble for people.

If so, then it might have been my fault for getting everyone involved right now.

“Kisaragi! Just calm down. Being taken hostage means that they won't be killed anytime soon. Since we don't know what's going on, it can't be helped that we're just recklessly jumping into things, right?”

“You're right..... I'm..... sorry.....”

I wiped my tears, but they just kept coming.

This was the second time I'd cried today, but because it had been so fun up until then, it felt like it's been a long time since I'd last cried.

What on earth was I going to do.....?

After a short silence, I heard frantic noises from the other side of the shutters.

I assumed it was the police, but it seemed like they couldn't make any movements because of the shutters.

Marie-chan hugged herself in fear.

Kido-san closed her eyes; it seemed like she was thinking about something...

“Uwah.....!”

“Eek.....!”

Without any advance notice, Kido-san made a sudden movement, surprising Marie-chan and causing her to jump..

The cause for that was the ringing of Kido-san's phone, which she had put inside her hoodie.

“A text.....!?”

Kido-san took out her phone, looking nervous again.

But right after that, her expression changed to a tired one.

Marie-chan and I ended up staring at her expression, which didn't match the situation at hand.

“U-um..... who's it from?”

“.....From an idiot.....”

Kido-san said and tossed her phone to me.

The body of the message was displayed on the screen, and I saw that the sender was Kano-san.

“Subject: I was captured~!

Body: How's going with you guys? I'm managing with my situation over here. Right now, I'm sitting lined up with everyone else! This is the first time I've been taken hostage! Ah! Kisaragi-chan's big brother is also captured~! Why, he's right next to me! Which means that this is the time for a commemoration photo (a photo is attached). And that concludes my report of the current situation.”
After she'd finished reading the text, and opened the attached photo, behind my brother, who'd been captured, was Kano-san making a peace sign. Furthermore, the other hostages around them, with their anxious expressions, were clearly shown, as well.

It was a perfectly-taken shot, without a single bit of blur.

“Leader..... Is he alright in head.....?”

“No, it's so bad that he won't ever recover from it.....”

“H-hey, Kido..... Kano's not in danger.....?”

“No, he *is* in danger. His head is, in particular. We have to hurry up and bring him to the doctor and get his brain dissected.”

“.....By the way, why can he still use his phone even though he's captured?”

“Ah, you're right.....! The people around him are all tied up, but Kano's the only one doing a peace sign.”

“This guy is probably so stupid that the terrorists decided they didn't have to tie him up.”

“.....”

The three of us fell into silence. I wonder where the serious atmosphere had gone.

For some reason, I suddenly had the feeling that we'd been made to go along with a horrible farce.

"Leader..... Um....."

".....For the time being, the current situation doesn't look like it'll be getting any worse..... Hopefully....."

"Kano looks like he's having fun~"

I sighed while staring at the photo that looked like "the commemoration photo of a student on a field trip who was too excited".

Seriously, what is up with this situation?

"But, really, why is he not tied up? Even idiots have to tied up, right?"

"To the people around him, Kano should look like he's just as scared as they are."

"Ah, is Kano disguising himself again?"

"Eh.....? What do you mean by that.....?"

"To put it simply, he has the 'eye deceiving' ability'. If my ability makes me 'invisible', then his ability 'shows other people something different'."

"Wh..... What does that mean exactly.....?"

"Basically it's something like, you thought that you brought a cute cat home, but it was actually a big dog."

"Wow. Kido's example is cute~"

Marie-chan giggled and Kido-san actually blushed.

"Ah, no, don't joke around. I-I'm not interested in animals....."

"In other words, his ability lets him create illusions.....?"

"Well, it's something like that. It's just that his ability has a small range. It can only work on himself."

"Eh?"

"Even as we were coming to the department store, although he may not have let you see it that way, he was observing our surroundings then. It was like that when the bicycle went past us too."

"Ah....."

When it had looked like was walking facing us, had he actually been walking while checking our surroundings?

So that we wouldn't have to worry about it.....?

".....But still....."

"Yeah..... In any case, this guy's an idiot....."

On the screen, the guy making a peace sign had an extremely refreshing smile, but it seemed to only make him look even more like an idiot.

But thanks to Kano-san, Marie-chan had stopped crying, and I'd also completely calmed down. Maybe he was actually an amazing person.

Even so, my stupid brother shown at the back seriously did nothing but make me worry.

If he went through something like this when he went outside, wouldn't he just become even more of a shut-in?

As I thought about such things while looking at the photo, an idea suddenly came to mind.

The idea that suddenly came to me brought forth new ideas one after another, and I absentmindedly thought up of a 'strategy'.

"Ah..... Ah.....!!"

"Hm? What? What's wrong?"

"Leader will 'conceal the eyes', then I....."

"Haah? What are you talking about?"

When she said that to me, I somehow became really embarrassed at what I'd just said.

But the strategy I'd thought up might've been the only way for us to overcome this situation.

"Leader. I think that we might just be able to defeat..... these people."

".....What do you mean?"

"Um, you see..... Hmm, it's hard to say it..... I want to think about it while writing it down, so can I borrow your phone?"

"Hm? I don't mind, but....."

"In short....."

When I was typing on the cell phone I borrowed from Kido-san, a man's voice started to come from the in-store speaker. The person who spoke was probably the leader of the terrorists.

"A ransom of a billion yen, huh..... So even the criminals themselves are pretty idiotic."

"Somehow a billion makes them sound stupid, doesn't it? It's like the amount of money only kids would come up with."

Maybe it was because we'd seen an abnormal idiot not too long ago, so even the terrorists felt like idiots to us.

"How much is a billion?"

"If you sell two fake flowers in a day, then that's how much you'd get in a hundred million days."

"Eh.....? What do you mean?"

"No, never mind....."

Although I was listening to the criminals' negotiations casually, I had to work on making a concrete strategy.

I steadily typed on the reply screen to Kano-san's text message.

"Um, uhh, please wait a moment..... I'll do this, and then that....."

"I don't mind, but..... Will this really work?"

"Yes, I think so..... H-huh.....? Uhm....."

When I've typed midway through the strategy, I realized that I'd forgotten about the very last thing. This might cause many people to be injured. I had to avoid that, no matter what.....

"Oh no..... Maybe it's actually no good.....?"

"What!? What do you mean?"

"Eek..... Please wait a second..... Umm....."

"Hey, hey, what are you two talking about.....?"

Marie-chan, who had been listening on the side, leaned closer.

Now that I think about it, I didn't notice because I've been talking to Kido-san all this time, but Marie-chan seemed to have calmed down a lot.

"Ah, uhm..... I'm making a strategy....."

"Eh, strategy?! That sounds cool.....!"

"Ah~ Marie, quiet down. You wouldn't be able to help even if you joined in."

"Hmph~....."

"Huh? But..... if I 'captivate the eyes', Marie-chan will 'make eye contact', so——"

"Eh? Did you say something.....? Kisaragi?"

".....I see!This can work! This will work! I'm done!!"

When I finished typing and showed the screen of the phone to Kido-san, Marie-chan joined in and peeked at it, too.

"Hmm..... Eh, haah!? Who's this person who shows up in the middle?!"

"Ah, that person is my acquaintance..... Um, it's just as written here....."

"Can they really.....?"

"I-it should be..... Okay..... I'm sure. A-anyway, I want to confirm it with Kano-san!"

"Wow..... My name is also in the last part.....!"

"Anyway, can I send this to him now.....!?"

".....If that person really is there..... then I'm sure....."

"Eh.....?"

Just as I thought I'd heard Kido-san mumbling something in a small voice, she raised her head and faced me.

"——No, I'm sure that if we assume that that person is there, it's a good strategy. This might be the only counterattack we can do now.Good job, newbie."

".....Yes! Thank you! I-I'll send it.....!"

I was really happy.

From all the times I'd been complimented up until then, that might've be the happiest I'd ever been.

"Hey, hey..... I don't get what's going on at all, though....."

"Ah, Marie-chan, you'll..... um..... I-I'll give the signal! So just stay with us until then? Okay?"

".....? Okay! I get it! I'll do my best!"

Marie-chan clenched both of her hands and did a small fist pump.

This strategy would fail if Marie-chan and I didn't work well together, but we had no choice but to wing it.

I was still worried, but this would work..... I had to make it work!

Kido's phone, which I was still holding, received a text message.

Only a short time had passed after I'd sent the text message, but..... As expected, it was from Kano-san.

"Subject: Interesting!

Body: Kisaragi-chan's strategy is interesting! The person Kisaragi-chan talked about is probably here, too! I heard a voice speaking from just now, but that person seems like a good, brave person!

Anyway, I just want to make sure, but are you gonna be able to come closer so without getting found out? Also, I took another commemoration photo, because I have nothing else to do——”

I read the text until this part, and without even opening the attached photo, I immediately answered “Yes” to the question, “Do you want to delete this message?”.

“Um, I think it’s okay!”

“Aah, alright.”

It seemed that the degree of Kano-san’s idiocy was conveyed to Kido-san.

“Will we really be able to get closer without being found out?”

“There shouldn’t be a problem as long as we don’t bump into anyone. Just take care and don’t be careless, the enemies have guns.”

“Okay!”

Finally, it was time for the strategy to begin. The three of us huddled close together and went out to the center aisle.

When I took a look at the inner part of the floor, I saw that the hostages were assembled in front of the wall.

“Looking at them like this really makes them look like hostages..... It’s like this is the first time it actually feels real.”

“It’s the same for me. Hey, Marie, don’t stray off too far, okay?”

“Okay!”

Marie-chan was so scared of the crowd of people, but in front of the armed terrorists, she didn’t seem any different from how she usually was. Maybe she was, in a way, exceptionally talented, too.

Although I was also nervous, strangely, I didn’t really feel afraid that there were terrorists right before my eyes, either.

We advanced until we were close to the end of the aisle, and I saw Kano-san and my brother sitting somewhere that had been a blind spot for us earlier.

“.....Why is that idiot grinning like that? At least try to hide it a little, stupid.....”

“.....I knew it, big brother somehow looks so serious..... He’s a wimp, so if he looks that confident, I think that he’s probably thinking the same thing as I am.”

“You’re siblings, so you’re probably similar in some ways..... Wait, Marie..... What are you doing?”

“Eh, it looked kind of cool, so.....”

Marie-chan had obtained a handheld massager from somewhere.

Guessing from her expression, she probably meant to bring some kind of weapon.

“.....Well, whatever..... Just return it later.....”

“Yep! I’ll return it later.”

“Ahaha..... Well, anyway, let’s go around to the back through this aisle.”

We went through a narrow aisle from the wide, center aisle, and saw that a bearded man, who seemed like the main culprit, sitting in front of the shutters.

Judging from how he was playing with his phone, he seemed relaxed, probably thinking that everything had gone according to his plan.

“He’s probably the ringleader, right? He has such an evil-looking face.....”

“I’m sure that it’s him. His face makes him look like he has a rotten personality.”

“H-his face is scary.....”

He probably never thought that his looks would be insulted in a place like this.

But there was a heinous criminal right before our eyes.

Even his beard looked like it expressed the man’s atrocity.

“Ah, Kano’s there.....”

“Did you just notice that now.....?”

“Yeah. It’s because I went to take this a while ago..... E-Eh? Huh.....? Uwaah!!”

“Ah, wait.....!”

Marie-chan tried to lift up the handheld massager, but the cord trailing from it tangled with her feet. And just like that, she fell down spectacularly, and the handheld massager flew, aimed at the bearded man.

““Uwaaaaaaaaaa!!””

Kido-san and I screamed loudly at the same time. Even though we tried reaching our hands out, the handheld massager directly hit the back of the bearded man’s head at full force.

Without holding back, the bearded man’s face twisted in pain. At the same time, Kido-san slid down and caught the handheld massager right before it fell to the floor. The three of us quickly escaped to the narrow aisle.

“Are you stupid!? Do you wanna die!?”

“Eek..... I-I’m sorry~.....”

“Ah~ Just now, I thought I was really going to die..... I saw my life flash before my eyes.....”

We sat down in the aisle and heard the enraged voice of the bearded man from just now, along with his subordinate’s cries.

Aah, I’m truly sorry, Mr. Subordinate..... But, well, this was what they call divine punishment for doing evil deeds.....

A little while after that, I received a text message from Kano-san on Kido-san’s phone which I had been holding onto.

‘Subject: It seems okay~

Body: Your brother said that if there’s a chance, then the probability of success would be 100%! Looks like things are getting interesting! But still, what happened just now..... That was the best

(lol)'

When I peeked out from the aisle to the direction of where the hostages were held, I could see Kano-san grinning from behind my brother, who was waiting for a chance with a serious face.

The continuation of the text message was like this.



“Actually, I’m getting bored, so I want to hurry up and go home. Ah, I told your brother to wait until the next time the bearded guy starts a broadcast~”

“So it really seems like it’ll be okay, then. Alright, let’s get going with our plan, then!”

“Okay, then..... Let’s go.....!”

“Right..... Somehow, I’m tired of seeing that bearded guy already.....!”

“I-I wonder if it’s okay for me not to apologize to that person.....”

“Don’t stray away from me until I tell you that it’s okay.”

“Eh, okay? Got it!”

Just like she did before, Marie-chan held onto the hem of Kido-san’s hoodie.

“Then, shall we go.....”

“Right..... Eh, what!? Aren’t they starting the broadcast now!?”

Just as we went out to the wide aisle again, the second broadcast started.

“Wha.....!? That’s too early.....! Hey! Marie! We need to hurry.”

“Eh? Eh? What? ——Uwaah!”

I went ahead first, and Kido-san was in a position of half-dragging Marie-chan along as we headed to the TV corner.

Cutting through the wide aisle, we reached the opposite side of where the bearded men were and where the hostages were being kept.

On the right side of the wall, several large TVs were being displayed.

“Alright.....! We made i-.....”

But at the next moment, what jumped into my line of sight was the bearded man who was shouting earlier, and my brother, who was being lifted off his feet by his hair.

“B-big brother.....”

“Hey! And what good would it do if you went there!? No one else but you knows the timing for the strategy, you know!?”

“.....!!”

She was right. But right in front of my eyes, my brother was.....!!

“.....Ki-Kisaragi!”

“Eh.....?”

Suddenly Marie-chan held my hand.

“I don’t really get what’s going on, but..... It’ll be okay!”

Marie-chan held my hand even tighter, and looked into my eyes as she continued.

“I’m sure it’ll work!!”

With those words as the start, all sounds vanished from my world.

The back of my eyes felt hot. I could feel the sensation of all my nerves focusing only on my vision.

Right now, I could clearly know where everyone’s “eyes” were looking at.

“.....Okay!”

I slowly breathed in and concentrated.

There are nine terrorists in this floor. I knew full-well where they were in this place.

“Leader! The third 42-inch TV from the left! Let’s start with that one!”

“Understood. Hey, Marie, let’s go.”

“O-okay.....!”

The three of us lined up below the TV I had pointed at, and placed our hands there.

Now all we needed was the timing.

I knew better than anyone else, the moment when people’s “eyes” gathered.

“.....like you.....”

.....Wait a little more..... Not yet.....!

“Bastards like you should just rot in jail for the rest of your life!!”

Even though he was an unreliable big brother, he could actually be pretty cool sometimes.

The moment his voice resounded through the floor, everyone's gazes were focused on him.

Soon, I would "captivate" all of those "eyes" without leaving a single one out!

"Now! Let's do it!"

We swiftly knocked the TV to the floor.

At that moment, everyone's gazes were focused on the TV, smashed into pieces.

At the same time that everyone breathed in as they observed the TV, we knocked down the speakers below.

"Where's the next one!?"

"Next is.....! That one! That shelf!"

".....That's more like you taking revenge on him rather than getting people's attention, right?"

"Ahaha..... Just a little."

The bearded man came closer, carrying a pistol in one hand.

"Who's there——!?"

"Ready, set—!"

At the same time as the shout, we kicked down the goods display shelf with all our strength.

"Uoooh!?"

The contents of the shelf tumbled out and crushed the bearded man under their weight.

"And then.....!"

As I looked at the other side of the fallen shelf, there was my brother, standing up and starting to run.

Without even noticing us, he passed by me with an expression full of resolution.

“——I'll leave the rest to you, Ene-chan.”

I whispered.

Of course, there was no answer, nor was I expecting one.

I heard my brother call out for her, and something flickered across the screen.

The moment I thought that it was all over.....

——I heard a gunshot being fired.

“.....!?”

When I turned around, I saw my brother, fallen in front of a computer.

“.....Eh.....?”

“Damn it.....! They actually did it.....!”

There was the loud, roaring sound of a motor, and at the same time, the shutters started to rise with a rattle.

“.....Big brother!!”

Lying face down, my brother showed absolutely no signs of getting back up.

Kano-san rushed over to my brother.

“Come on, Kisaragi-chan! The shutters are already going to open! Hurry up!”

“——!”

When the shutters opened about twenty centimeters, I saw the feet of the police force trying to break in.

Seeing that, even Kido-san raised her voice in panic.

The noise in the floor was at its loudest.

Several terrorists pointed to the shutters, shouting something in confused voices.

At this rate, if the shutters completely opened, the police force and the terrorists might even start a head-on gunfight and a lot of people would be injured.

“Kisaragi——!”

“I know.....!”

In order to save my brother as soon as possible, I had no other choice but to do it.....!

“Marie-chan!”

“Okay!”

“.....Let’s go!”

I nodded, and Kido-san stopped using her ability on me.

At that moment, I could feel that the “eyes” of each and every person in this place, even the terrorists, were locked onto me, against their any will or reason.

“.....I’m Kisaragi—Kisaragi Momo. I’m sixteen years old. ——And I’m an idol!”

——Silence.

At that moment, I “captivated the eyes” of everyone.

“Please take care of the rest!Marie-chan!”

Marie-chan walked out in front of me.

She was standing between everyone’s gazes, and me.

Marie-chan made “eye contact” with “each and every” person here, excluding us, wriggled her hair and with bright red eyes, and said,

“I’m sorry.”

—It sounded almost like a magic spell that stopped time.



“We’re breaking in——!!?”

We heard the rattling sound of the shutters opening, and the sound of footsteps.

It seemed that the police force had entered.

But of course, the hostages and the terrorists didn’t put up any form of resistance, as they were frozen while staring at a single spot.

However, following their gaze, there was no one there.

To be more accurate, no one would be able to recognize who it was that they were looking at.

“Blindfold Complete..... huh.”

Perhaps out of relief, Kido-san heaved a gloomy sigh.

Her eyes turned red and her face showed her tiredness.

“.....! Big brother!”

I rushed over to where my brother was lying down.

“.....Kano-san! How’s my big brother!?”

Kano-san, who was looking after my brother, had an unusually serious expression.

“.....Unfortunately.....”

No way.....! It couldn't be.....!!

“——Unfortunately, it seems like he fainted just from being grazed by the bullet, I think?”

With a pained expression, my brother muttered deliriously, “Please forgive meee..... I didn't mean to do thaaat.....”

.....Oh, give me a break already. And I'd finally thought that you were cool, too. I take back my words.

——In the end, my stupid brother would always be my stupid brother.

The police force couldn't hide their surprise at how easily they had captured the terrorists and how everyone didn't even move an inch. All of the hostages were frozen, too, after all, so it made sense.

“Hey, are you okay!? Hey! Hey!!”

“A-anyway, restrain all of the criminals! Hey, there's also someone under the shelf! Make sure that you restrain him!”

While the police force were running around with their hands full, Kido-san, Kano-san and I had a small celebration for the success of the strategy.

“But still, good job for coming up with something like this. Like making everyone's eyes focus on Marie.”

“Well, I thought that my brother might open the shutters, but it would be dangerous if something like a gunfight broke out. Then, when I thought about how I could stop everyone's movement, I just happened to remember the time Kano-san had become frozen like stone.....”

“Hmm, so even an idiot can be helpful in his own way.”

“Eh, that's mean! Ah, right, Kido, did you see my photo? Well did you?”

“I deleted it.”

Anyway, with this, I could finally relax. The police force finished restraining the terrorists, but this time, they were in an uproar because everyone was frozen.

“Is this what they call..... case closed?”

“Yeah... It's all thanks to you. Good job.”

“Eh? Well..... Ehehe..... Wait, now that I think about it, where's Marie-cha-.....”

Noticing that Marie-chan wasn't with us, I looked around, and an unexpected situation jumped into my sight.

Holding the handheld massager, Marie-chan was being questioned by one of the members of the police force.

““Uwaaaaaaaaaaa!!””

Kido-san and I screamed again.

“Th-that idiot.....! She tried to return the massager!”

“Uwawawa..... Wh-what do we do!?”

“Pfft..... Aah, so that's the handheld massager that knocked out the bearded guy! But why something like that..... Is this some kind of joke? Pfft..... M-y stomach hurts!”

“You shut up for a while! Damn it..... What should we do.....”

Punched by Kido-san, Kano-san crumpled to the floor.

“L-Leader, Marie-chan is pointing at us, isn’t she.....?”

“H-hey, stupid, don’t.....”

“U-uwaah!! They’re coming this way!! Wah..... Kano-san, you’re in the way!! Hurry up and stand!!”

“Kido..... punched..... my stomach.....”

“You..... Hurry up and stand! Aaah.....”

Right after Kido-san let out a miserable voice, one of the members of the police force who came closer to us tripped over Kano-san and fell. At the same time, said policeman fell on his butt with a loud cry.

“Ru.....” “Le.....”

“Run!!” “Let’s run!!”

I started running at the same time as Kido-san, and I headed to where Marie-chan was.

When I pulled her away from the police force, Marie-chan looked relieved upon noticing me.

The police force, who were left behind, shouted, “Where are you going!? Wait a second!!” but we paid them no heed and kept on running.

But what were we to do next.....?!

Right after I thought that, the whole floor immediately started to become noisy.

Marie-chan’s petrification had finally worn off. Instantly, the police force turned their gaze to them. Kido-san didn’t miss that chance.

Once again, we became invisible.

The police force who turned to look at us again shouted in agitation, “They..... disappeared!?”

“Hey, Kisaragi! It’s dangerous to stay here any longer! We’re leaving right now!”

“O-okay!! Ah..... But.....!”

“.....Hey, Kano!! Carry Kisaragi’s big brother!”

“Ehh? That’s so..... not troublesome, I really feel like carrying someone. Yeah.”

“Kano-san, that’s so gross.....”

Thanks to Kido-san making a fist at him, Kano-san carried my brother.

The entire time my brother was carried on Kano-san’s shoulders, he mumbled nonsense like, “Eep..... Please forgive me.....” that made me want to cover my ears.

“Ah! That’s right!Ene-chan! Are you there?”

Pulling out the cell phone that was connected to a computer, I talked to it and heard the lively voice of a girl.

“Ooh!? That voice must be the little sister!! Huh!? Were you here for shopping!? What happened to Master!?”

“U-uhm..... I’ll explain later! Anyway, would you come with us?”

“Of course I would!! Is it to the amusement park?”

“W-well..... No.....?”

“Hey! We’re leaving!”

“O-okay!!”

I ran to the staircase, leaving the floor.

Ahh, seriously, what did I even come here for today..... I didn’t even get to buy my new phone, or the teacups, either.

.....But still, if there was one thing I’d succeeded in doing.....

When I looked at Marie-chan’s face, I saw that she was already starting to pant.

“Hey, Marie-chan.”

“Wh-what is it.....? Kisa—..... Momo-chan!”

“——! Today..... I had so much fun!”

Marie-chan stared at me for a moment when she heard that, but soon smiled and whispered, “Me too.”

“.....Thank you!”

“——Little sister, Little sister!!”

I heard Ene-chan’s voice from the phone I put in my pocket.

“Hm? What is it, Ene-chan?”

“Is this it.....? Is this what the rumored ‘yuri’ is.....? Hey, Little sis——”

I turned off the phone and stuffed it deep into my pocket.

“Yu... Yuri? What’s wrong with the lily flowers? They’re really pretty——”

“I-it’s nothing! Marie-chan, it’s nothing you have to worry about!”

“.....?”

I sweated, but it wasn’t the kind of sweat I got from running.

This insensitive part of Ene-chan might be what made her and my big brother’s wavelengths match.

“Okay! We’re going down now!”

Just as we reached the staircase, I heard a loud sigh coming from behind me.

“Uh..... Am I really going to go down the staircase while carrying her brother? All seven floors.....!?”

“After the staircase, we’re going outside.”

At Kido-san’s words, even Kano-san made an expression full of despair.

“Ueeh.....”

“Kano-san, I apologize for my stupid big brother..... L-let’s take it ea——”

“She was really here! Momo-chan herself! I’m sure of it!!”

Just as I was about to suggest that we take it easy, I heard a voice saying that from among the people who were taken hostage, and all of us looked at each other.

“I’m sure she’s still close by! She was the one who saved us!”

They even ignored the police who tried to restrain them, and the noise gradually became louder.

“It looks like..... We can’t even take it easy, huh?”

“I-I’m sorry..... Um.....”

“Haah..... Seriously, today is just so crazy.....”

“I-I can’t take it anymore.....”

The sun that shone through the window, as usual, radiated an intense light.

I was sure that it would still be so hot outside that our throats would dry up.

The cicadas would certainly be crying out foolishly, and the heat haze would be there flickering.

I felt a little irritated, but it was very different feeling from “that” which I felt before.

August 14th, with it being a day like this...

——I had a feeling that I would never forget about it.

Epilogue

The 15th of August. A long, long day finally came to an end.

To think that we’d actually spend the whole day playing around at an amusement park...

Leaving Ene aside, the fact that my sister and her friends also came was quite unexpected. Where in the world did I go wrong...

*

Going back to today morning.

My awakening in the morning was so peaceful, and in no way strange or mysterious, so I had no warning of the major incident that I was about to experience.

Again, if I'd later "woken up in a hospital bed", it still might have made some sense.

However, when I woke up, there was even a medusa and a transparent human (?), and I was in a mysterious organization's hideout, and before I realized it, it seems I owed this organization my life, and for some reason my sister had somehow become a member of this group.

...If you're thinking "I've got no idea what this kid's talking about", don't worry.

Honestly I'm the one who's the most confused here.

My sister told me about the incident in full detail, and it was quite extraordinary. We even had a long question and answer session, but in the end I'm still pretty confused.

The only thing I got was that, when I tried talking to these people that my sister calls her friends, they were surprisingly nice.

Actually, it might be because I'd only ever talked to that software with her outrageous personality, that I might have greatly overestimated these guys.

Well, at the very least, the one called Kido seemed like a pretty normal person.

The breakfast she made was delicious, it seems like she has a homely side to her.

If you ignore the fact that she had a scary look in her eyes, she's probably the most decent out of all of us, myself included.

It was certainly quite a suspicious group, but it seems they were willing to help my sister concerning her troubles about her "eyes". Also, at the very least, this was the first time my sister had ever introduced other people as her "friends", and I myself soon felt comfortable around them.

However, the most troublesome was Ene.

When did she get so close to my sister...

She hasn't sent her the data of that treasured image, right...?

Ah...I feel like she might've...I'm scared...give me a break...my dignity as an older brother will...

Feeling worried that I might be exposed the whole time I was at the amusement part, to be blunt I couldn't remember much of what happened while everyone was playing around.

I just, as Ene constantly demanded, rode various rides.

But then again, this isn't bad once in a while, I suppose.

It's been a while since I've experienced something like this.

*

After we left the amusement part, we walked for a while.

But leaving that aside, the girl I was carrying on my back, how long had she been a shut-in? To think that there was actually someone with less strength than me...

"I'm really sorry. I didn't think that she'd get so excited that she'd actually collapse..."

"No, no, it's fine with Shintaro-kun! To carry a girl on his back is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, no?"

"Really, since Onii-chan is a good-for-nothing and a 2D otaku, it's really only a once-in-a-lifetime experience, right? Anyways, Ene-chan, the amusement park was so much fun, wasn't it~!?"

“Yeaah! It was incredibly fun! Especially the part where Master threw up, that was the best! I’ll send everyone a picture when we get back!!”

“Ooh! Ene-chan you’ve got good sense~! Well then, I’ll send you Mary’s treasured image in exchange...”

“Oooooh! Almond-eyes-san is pretty good too...! That’s fine with me!”

“S...stop...don’t show anyone...”

“Hey, if you’re awake, walk by yourself Mary. I’m sure Shintaro’s tired as well.”

“Ju...just a bit more...”

“Ahaha...huh, what’s that?”

“Hm?”

“...An accident?”

As we were walking on a small road leading off the main road, we caught sight of a crowd gathering right in front of a small park.

It seemed that the ambulance had just arrived, and the rescue members carried a stretcher down hurriedly, pushing their way through the crowd.

Through the gaps, I saw the figure of a young boy about the same age as me crouching near the middle of the crowd.

With his hands on the ground, he was looking at a young boy who was lying down with worry. I couldn’t see quite so clearly, but I’d say the collapsed boy seemed about 10 years old...?

“...He seems young.”

“Yeah. I wonder if he’s hurt...?”

Kido and Kano whispered.

The boy, although there were no noticeable outer signs, was limp and appeared to have lost consciousness...

However, there was nothing we could do about it.

As we passed through without staring too much, I noticed Ene’s strange behavior.





“...!”

“...Ene-chan? What's wrong?”

“...Konoha...?”

“Huh...? What did you say? Ene?”

The young boy was carried to the ambulance, and the young man, accompanying him, got in as well.
The ambulance turned on its siren once again, and left the scene.

“...Little sister! Could you please, chase after the person from just now?”

“W-Whaat!? Why!?”

“Please, quickly!! I beg you...!”

“O-onii-chan...!?”

“What's wrong, Ene? Did something happen?”

“...Why, why is he...?”

On the 15th of August at 5 in the afternoon, “Panzermast” resounded throughout the town...

———And so from here, our long, long “first day”, began at long last.

A Story That Makes You Want to Cover Your Eyes

My name is Jin.

How did you like *Kagerou Daze -in a daze-*?

This time, I wrote this novel in tandem with my first album *Mekakucity Days* and incorporated four of the songs from the album as motifs for the novel.

I plan to write novels about songs other than the ones on this album in the future as well.

However, if this novel isn't successful, I might just write the next one as a sort of dirty romantic school comedy about some girls who nonchalantly go on with their everyday lives.

.....Actually, that would be pretty fantastic.

Ah, that's right, the characters' names were revealed in this book. I think I came up with some pretty cool names for them, like how I named a character after a flower, among other things.

Among those flowers was a kind of rose that I knew of called "tchin-tchin*."

Isn't that a cool name?

In Italian, "cin cin" means "cheers!" like a toast.

I'm sure it's supposed to be like the sound of glasses clinking together.

Anyway, writing the novel was pretty tough.

I thought I was going to die.

While simultaneously producing the album and writing this novel, *and* doing a live concert, I had such an jam-packed schedule that I didn't even have time to admire the beauty of the tchin-tchin.

With that being said, now that I've just been freed from that curse, I'm now writing this afterward while admiring the tchin-tchin.

I've been admiring it so much that even though I've only written this much, nearly two hours have already passed.

I'm sorry I'm such a slow writer.

Ah, of course, I'm talking about the rose, you know?

Incidentally, I was looking at a rose field guide on the internet, and under tchin-tchin, it said that it had a very faint smell. A very modest and elegant rose.

Oh, speaking of tchin-tchins, there's also a Nigerian treat called "chin chin" as well. I think it's a kind of cookie.

Again, isn't it a cool name?

I think it's amazing that you can even use it for food.

Spending an afternoon in Nigeria looking at tchin-tchin roses while stuffing your face with chin chin cookies..... It'd be a pretty neat situation to be in, wouldn't it?

.....Ah! I have no more pages left!

Well, I've written a rather elegant afterward, but if the opportunity arises, I'd like you to read the afterward in the next volume as well. If the opportunity arises.....!

So, please cheer me on from here on out.